

Making Sense of Qualitative Data Through Reflexive Thematic Analysis: Principles and Methodological Distinctions

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ABSTRACT

Thematic analysis represents a family of approaches underpinned by different philosophical assumptions and methodological traditions, particularly within interpretivist and constructivist paradigms. However, many qualitative studies provide limited explanations of how themes are developed and how analytical decisions are made, resulting in methodological ambiguities that may weaken the credibility and transparency of research findings. One of the analytic methods within thematic analysis is Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). Reflexive Thematic Analysis emphasizes on researcher subjectivity, reflexivity, and the active construction of themes as interpretive outputs rather than objective discoveries embedded within data. Unlike Grounded Theory, which seeks to develop explanatory theory from systematically generated data; Narrative Inquiry, which focuses on understanding human experiences through stories; and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which aims to explore and interpret individuals' lived experiences, RTA is primarily concerned with identifying and interpreting patterns of shared meaning across a dataset. These methodological distinctions influence how data are collected, analyzed, interpreted, and reported, making it essential for researchers to understand the unique contribution of each approach. This paper aims to advance understanding of Reflexive Thematic Analysis by examining its conceptual foundations, guiding principles, analytical processes, and reporting practices. Drawing selectively on Grounded Theory, Narrative Inquiry, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as comparative reference points, this paper highlights the distinctive characteristics that make RTA an appropriate methodological choice for many qualitative studies. By clarifying the philosophical assumptions and practical application of RTA, the paper contributes to methodological rigor in qualitative research and offers guidance to researchers seeking to produce transparent, coherent, and meaningful analyses of qualitative datasets.

Keywords: Thematic analysis, interpretivists, constructivists, Reflexive thematic analysis, Grounded Theory, Narrative Inquiry, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Thematic Analysis: A Critical and Theoretical Perspective

Thematic analysis (TA) has emerged as one of the most widely utilized qualitative data analysis approaches across disciplines such as education, psychology, healthcare, and social sciences because of its capacity to systematically examine and interpret complex qualitative datasets. Beyond merely identifying patterns within data, thematic analysis provides researchers with a framework for constructing meaningful interpretations of participants' experiences, perceptions, and social realities (Xu & Zammit, 2020). Its broad applicability has made it particularly attractive to researchers seeking methodological flexibility while maintaining analytical rigor. However, this flexibility represents both a strength and a limitation, creating ongoing debates regarding the epistemological coherence and methodological robustness of thematic analysis.

From a critical perspective, thematic analysis is not simply a technical process of coding and categorizing data. Rather, it is an interpretive act through which researchers actively construct meanings from participants' accounts. As Christou (2024) and Lochmiller (2021) suggest, thematic analysis enables the identification of recurring patterns across interviews, focus group discussions, and open-ended responses, which are subsequently

developed into themes. Nevertheless, critics argue that the emphasis on pattern recognition may inadvertently encourage superficial descriptive analysis if researchers fail to move beyond the explicit content of participants' narratives. Consequently, the analytical value of thematic analysis depends not on the mere identification of themes but on the depth of interpretation that links those themes to broader theoretical, social, and contextual realities.

A significant theoretical debate surrounding thematic analysis concerns its epistemological positioning. Unlike methodologies such as phenomenology, grounded theory, or narrative inquiry, thematic analysis is not inherently tied to a single philosophical tradition. Kiger and Varpio (2020) contend that this flexibility allows researchers to apply thematic analysis within positivist, interpretivist, critical, or constructivist paradigms. However, Thompson (2022) cautions that such flexibility can result in methodological ambiguity, where researchers combine incompatible philosophical assumptions, producing what has been described as a methodological "mishmash." This critique highlights the importance of ensuring congruence between research questions, theoretical frameworks, methods of data collection, and analytical procedures. Failure to establish this alignment risks reducing thematic analysis to a mechanical coding exercise devoid of theoretical depth.

The theoretical innovation of contemporary thematic analysis is evident in the evolution of reflexive thematic analysis advanced by scholars such as Braun and Clarke (2006). Reflexive thematic analysis challenges traditional assumptions that themes objectively exist within data awaiting discovery. Instead, it conceptualizes themes as interpretive constructions co-produced through the interaction between researcher, participants, and context. This perspective draws heavily from social constructionist and interpretivist traditions, emphasizing researcher reflexivity as a central component of knowledge production. Under this framework, researchers are not neutral observers but active agents whose experiences, values, and theoretical orientations influence the analytical process. Consequently, reflexive thematic analysis contributes to broader debates concerning subjectivity, knowledge construction, and the politics of representation within qualitative research.

Another important theoretical contribution of thematic analysis lies in its capacity to bridge inductive and deductive forms of inquiry. While traditional accounts often portray thematic analysis as an inductive process that generates concepts directly from data (Rosairo, 2023), contemporary scholarship recognizes that purely inductive analysis is rarely achievable. Researchers inevitably bring prior theoretical knowledge, disciplinary assumptions, and contextual understandings to the research process. Therefore, thematic analysis can be viewed as operating along a continuum between data-driven and theory-driven approaches. This perspective aligns with abductive reasoning, where researchers move iteratively between empirical observations and theoretical explanations to develop richer interpretations of social phenomena. Such an approach enhances the explanatory power of thematic analysis by enabling researchers to move beyond description toward conceptual and theoretical development.

In educational research, thematic analysis demonstrates particular value because it facilitates the exploration of shared experiences and institutional processes while remaining sensitive to contextual variations. Islam et al. (2021) argue that thematic analysis is especially effective for identifying common meanings and collective patterns across participant groups. However, a critical limitation emerges when researchers prioritize consensus at the expense of minority or divergent voices. By focusing primarily on dominant themes, there is a risk of marginalizing alternative perspectives that may challenge prevailing assumptions or reveal hidden dimensions of educational practice. Therefore, theoretically informed thematic analysis should balance the identification of common patterns with an examination of contradictions, tensions, and silences within the dataset.

Furthermore, contemporary developments suggest that thematic analysis should not merely be regarded as a method for organizing qualitative data but as a mechanism for generating middle-range theory. Through systematic engagement with patterns of meaning, researchers can construct conceptual frameworks that explain relationships among social, cultural, organizational, and educational phenomena. Chaka et al. (2021) and Yanto (2023) emphasize that themes function not simply as categories but as analytical constructs capable of illuminating broader processes and structures. This perspective elevates thematic analysis from a descriptive technique to a theoretically generative methodology capable of contributing to scholarly debates and advancing disciplinary knowledge.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis: Philosophical Foundations and Contemporary Developments

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) has emerged as one of the most influential approaches to qualitative data analysis, particularly following the methodological developments advanced by Braun and Clarke. Unlike positivist-oriented qualitative approaches that strive for objectivity and researcher neutrality, RTA explicitly positions the researcher as an active and indispensable participant in the process of knowledge production. From this perspective, meanings are not viewed as fixed entities residing within the data awaiting discovery; rather, they are interpretively constructed through the interaction between the researcher, participants, and the broader socio-cultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Consequently, researcher subjectivity is regarded not as a methodological limitation to be controlled but as a valuable analytic resource that enriches interpretation and facilitates deeper engagement with participants' experiences.

A distinguishing characteristic of RTA is its theoretical and epistemological flexibility. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is not inherently tied to a single theoretical framework, enabling its application across a broad range of paradigmatic positions, including realist, contextualist, constructionist, interpretivist, and critical perspectives. This flexibility has contributed significantly to the widespread adoption of RTA across disciplines such as education, psychology, health sciences, and sociology. However, contemporary methodological scholarship cautions against interpreting this flexibility as philosophical neutrality. Rather, the absence of a predetermined theoretical allegiance places a greater responsibility on researchers to articulate and justify the epistemological assumptions that inform their studies. Theoretical flexibility therefore demands greater methodological transparency rather than less.

From a critical standpoint, one of the most persistent challenges in the application of RTA is the tendency among researchers to adopt thematic analysis as a purely technical coding procedure while neglecting the philosophical foundations that underpin the analytic process. Clarke and Braun (2018) contend that epistemological assumptions influence every stage of research, including the formulation of research questions, data generation, coding decisions, theme development, interpretation, and presentation of findings. Consequently, thematic analysis cannot be divorced from questions concerning the nature of reality (ontology), the production of knowledge (epistemology), and the role of the researcher in constructing meaning. Studies that fail to explicitly articulate these assumptions risk methodological incoherence, whereby analytical procedures become disconnected from the broader theoretical framework guiding the research.

The theoretical innovation of RTA lies in its rejection of coding reliability as the primary indicator of qualitative rigor. Traditional qualitative approaches influenced by positivist assumptions often emphasize inter-coder reliability, coding consistency, and replicability as markers of methodological quality. In contrast, Braun and Clarke (2019) argue that because themes are actively generated through researcher engagement with data, different researchers may legitimately produce different yet equally credible interpretations from the same dataset. Within RTA, therefore, rigor is achieved through reflexivity, transparency, analytical depth, and theoretical coherence rather than through statistical measures of agreement. This reconceptualization represents a significant departure from conventional notions of validity and reliability and aligns RTA more closely with contemporary interpretivist and constructionist traditions.

Braun and Clarke (2019) further distinguish between three major forms of thematic analysis, each reflecting different philosophical assumptions and methodological priorities. The first is Reflexive Thematic Analysis, which is situated firmly within the Big Q qualitative tradition and emphasizes researcher subjectivity, interpretive engagement, and theoretical reflexivity. The second is Codebook Thematic Analysis, which occupies a middle-ground position by employing structured coding frameworks while retaining elements of qualitative interpretation. The third is Coding Reliability Thematic Analysis, which adopts a more positivist orientation characterized by predefined coding schemes, multiple coders, and the pursuit of coding consistency through inter-rater agreement. These distinctions are significant because they demonstrate that thematic analysis is not a singular method but rather a family of approaches with differing assumptions regarding knowledge production, researcher involvement, and analytical outcomes.

The growing popularity of RTA has unfortunately contributed to conceptual confusion within qualitative research. Numerous studies claim to employ reflexive thematic analysis while simultaneously adopting

procedures associated with coding reliability approaches, such as calculating inter-coder reliability coefficients or seeking coder consensus. Such practices reveal a misunderstanding of the philosophical foundations of RTA and have prompted Braun and Clarke (2021) to caution against methodological mixing that compromises theoretical coherence. This concern highlights the necessity for researchers to clearly identify which version of thematic analysis they are employing and to ensure that their analytic practices align with the underlying assumptions of that approach.

Contemporary developments have also expanded the theoretical contribution of RTA beyond descriptive theme identification. Increasingly, scholars view RTA as a methodology capable of generating conceptual and theoretical insights rather than merely organizing qualitative data. Through iterative engagement with participants' narratives, researchers can develop nuanced understandings of social processes, institutional practices, identity constructions, and power relations. This capacity aligns RTA with broader interpretivist and critical traditions that seek not only to describe social phenomena but also to explain how meanings are constructed, negotiated, and contested within particular contexts.

The selection of RTA should therefore be guided by the research aims, the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, and the philosophical orientation of the study. RTA is particularly appropriate for studies seeking to explore subjective experiences, socially constructed meanings, and complex contextual realities where researcher interpretation is viewed as central to knowledge generation. Its emphasis on reflexivity, theoretical transparency, and interpretive depth makes it especially valuable for educational research, where understanding human experiences often requires engagement with multiple realities, perspectives, and contextual influences.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis represents a significant methodological advancement within qualitative inquiry. Its theoretical flexibility, emphasis on researcher reflexivity, and commitment to interpretive meaning-making distinguish it from more structured forms of thematic analysis. However, this flexibility should not be mistaken for methodological permissiveness. Rather, the credibility and rigor of RTA depend upon the researcher's ability to maintain epistemological coherence, engage critically with their own role in the analytic process, and generate theoretically informed interpretations that extend beyond descriptive accounts of the data.

Theme conceptualization and construction in Reflective Thematic Analysis

In Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), the identification of a theme is shaped by the researcher's interpretive engagement with the data rather than by predetermined criteria. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme captures a meaningful pattern that is relevant to the research question and contributes to understanding the phenomenon under investigation. While prevalence across the dataset may indicate the importance of a theme, frequency alone does not determine thematic significance. Rather, themes are judged by their analytical value and their capacity to illuminate key aspects of participants' experiences. Consequently, researchers must exercise reflexive and consistent judgement when determining which patterns warrant thematic development.

Analytical trajectory

A key analytical decision in thematic analysis concerns the scope and orientation of the analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that researchers may either provide a rich description of the entire dataset or conduct a detailed examination of a particular issue relevant to the research objectives. The choice depends largely on the study's purpose and research questions. Researchers must also decide whether the analysis will be inductive or theoretically driven. An inductive approach allows themes to be developed from patterns identified within the dataset itself, emphasizing participants' perspectives and experiences. As a result, the themes generated may not directly reflect the interview questions or existing theoretical frameworks. In contrast, a theoretical or deductive approach is guided by prior concepts, theories, or research interests and focuses specifically on aspects of the data that address predetermined analytical concerns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although presented as distinct approaches, contemporary qualitative research increasingly recognizes that analysis often involves movement between data-driven insights and theoretical interpretation.

Choosing the level of interpretation

Another important consideration concerns the level of interpretation adopted during analysis. Semantic themes

focus on the explicit meanings expressed by participants and remain closely aligned with the surface content of the data. The researcher seeks to describe what participants have directly communicated without moving beyond their stated accounts. Latent themes, by contrast, involve a deeper level of interpretation. Rather than focusing solely on what participants say, latent analysis explores the underlying assumptions, beliefs, ideologies, and social meanings that shape those accounts (Terry et al., 2017). This form of analysis is inherently more interpretive and often informed by broader theoretical perspectives.

Braun and Clarke (2006) acknowledge that thematic analysis may operate at either the semantic or latent level. Within RTA, however, researchers may engage with both forms of interpretation where appropriate, enabling a more nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and the broader contexts in which those experiences are situated.

The phases of Analysis in Reflective Thematic Analysis

Given the diversity of approaches associated with thematic analysis, researchers must clearly articulate how the analysis was conducted. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that transparency in describing analytical procedures enhances methodological coherence, credibility, and trustworthiness. Although RTA is characterized by methodological flexibility, this flexibility should not be mistaken for the absence of structure. To guide rigorous analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) propose six recursive phases that support the systematic development of themes. Rather than following a strictly linear sequence, researchers move iteratively between phases as interpretations evolve and new insights emerge.

The process begins with coding, which involves assigning concise labels to meaningful segments of data. Saldaña (2015) defines a code as a word or short phrase that captures the essence of a particular data segment. Coding enables researchers to organize and engage deeply with qualitative material, facilitating the identification of similarities, differences, and recurring ideas across the dataset. As analysis progresses, related codes are brought together into broader categories that represent shared meanings or conceptual relationships. Through ongoing comparison and interpretation, these categories reveal patterns that contribute to the development of themes. In reflexive thematic analysis, themes are not simply summaries of recurring topics; they are interpretive accounts that explain significant aspects of the phenomenon being studied (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The final stage of analysis involves refining and articulating themes so that they provide a coherent and theoretically meaningful explanation of participants' experiences. Well-developed themes move beyond description to offer analytical insights into how participants understand, experience, and construct their social realities. In this way, thematic analysis facilitates the generation of rich and nuanced understandings of complex qualitative phenomena.

The six-phase analytical process

Braun and Clarke (2020) developed a six-phase framework for thematic analysis to guide researchers in systematically examining qualitative data and identifying meaningful patterns within it. Although these phases are presented in a logical sequence, the authors emphasize that thematic analysis is not a strictly linear process where the researcher simply progresses from one stage to the next. Instead, the process is recursive and iterative, requiring continuous movement back and forth between phases as new insights emerge during analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). For this reason, Braun and Clarke (2013, 2020) advise that the six phases should be understood as flexible guiding principles rather than rigid procedural rules. Researchers are encouraged to adapt the process in ways that best align with the nature of their data and the objectives of their study.

Phase one: Familiarization with the data

The familiarization phase involves carefully reading and re-reading the entire dataset so that the researcher develops a deep understanding of the information collected. This stage is essential because it enables the researcher to identify ideas, meanings, and experiences that may be relevant to the research questions. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), manually transcribing data can significantly enhance this process by helping the researcher become more immersed in the dataset. They further recommend that transcription should be done

orthographically, capturing not only spoken words but also pauses, tone variations, inflections, and conversational breaks from both the participant and the interviewer.

In cases where the researcher did not personally collect the data, Braun and Clarke (2019) suggest that listening to audio recordings or watching video recordings can help the researcher gain a richer contextual understanding of participants' responses and interactions. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of engaging thoroughly with the entire dataset to ensure that all relevant perspectives and meanings are adequately considered during analysis.

Phase two: generating initial codes

Codes form the foundation upon which themes are later developed in thematic analysis. The coding process involves assigning concise descriptive or interpretive labels to segments of data that appear relevant to the research questions. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), researchers should work systematically through the entire dataset, giving equal attention to all data items in order to identify meaningful and potentially significant ideas. Effective codes are usually brief but sufficiently detailed to communicate the central meaning represented within the coded data.

During coding, researchers may highlight sections of text and attach corresponding codes in order to organize the data meaningfully. As the analysis progresses through repeated reading and re-coding of the dataset, some codes become more significant in explaining patterns within the data, while others may be discarded. Braun and Clarke (2021) explain that reflexive thematic analysis is recursive rather than linear, meaning that researchers frequently revisit earlier phases of analysis as new interpretations emerge. Consequently, documenting the development and refinement of codes throughout the analytical process enhances transparency and helps researchers track how themes evolve over time.

The coding process itself remains flexible and non-prescriptive. Researchers may segment and interpret data in different ways depending on the focus of the study. A single extract of data can even be coded at both semantic and latent levels where necessary. What remains important is that the coding process captures sufficient depth and diversity within the dataset to enable the identification of meaningful patterns and participants' differing perspectives. Additionally, Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize that codes should represent patterns occurring across multiple data items rather than isolated instances.

Phase three: generating themes

At this stage, the analytical focus shifts from examining isolated coded segments to exploring broader patterns of meaning across the entire dataset. The researcher begins reviewing and comparing codes in order to identify conceptual relationships and shared meanings that may contribute to the development of themes and sub-themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), this process often involves merging related codes that capture similar underlying ideas, while certain highly significant codes may evolve into overarching sub-themes or major themes within the analysis.

Importantly, themes are not viewed as objective entities that naturally emerge from the data. Rather, themes are actively generated through the researcher's interpretive engagement with the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize that the researcher plays a central role in constructing relationships among codes and determining how these relationships contribute to the broader analytical narrative. Consequently, the significance of a theme is not determined solely by the frequency with which it appears in the data, but by its capacity to meaningfully illuminate the phenomenon under investigation and address the research questions.

During this phase, the researcher also evaluates the coherence, distinctiveness, and analytical relevance of prospective themes. Themes may complement one another or even reveal tensions and contradictions within participants' experiences; however, together they should contribute to a coherent and insightful interpretation of the dataset. Although there is no predetermined number of themes required in thematic analysis, an excessive number of themes may result in fragmented and unfocused findings, whereas too few themes may oversimplify the complexity of the dataset. By the conclusion of this phase, the researcher is expected to generate a thematic

map, conceptual framework, or analytical table illustrating the relationships among codes, sub-themes, and overarching themes across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Phase four: reviewing potential themes

This phase involves a rigorous and recursive review of the candidate themes in relation to both the coded extracts and the entire dataset. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), the purpose of this stage is to evaluate whether the developing themes accurately and meaningfully represent the dataset while adequately addressing the research questions. During this process, the researcher critically revisits the themes, sub-themes, codes, and supporting data extracts to determine whether they form coherent and analytically useful patterns.

Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that researchers should critically interrogate each candidate theme by considering several key issues, including whether the theme genuinely contributes meaningful insight into the dataset, whether its boundaries are clearly defined, and whether there is sufficient evidence within the data to support its inclusion in the final analysis. Themes that appear overly broad, conceptually inconsistent, or weakly supported may require substantial revision or removal altogether. A coherent theme should demonstrate conceptual unity while still capturing the complexity of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Braun and Clarke (2021) draw attention to Patton (1990) principle of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity as a useful evaluative framework during this phase. Internal homogeneity refers to the degree to which data within a theme meaningfully fit together, whereas external heterogeneity concerns the distinctiveness of one theme from another. Together, these criteria help ensure that themes remain internally coherent while also maintaining clear analytical boundaries across the thematic framework.

As the review progresses, the researcher may find it necessary to merge themes, split themes into sub-themes, discard irrelevant codes, or introduce new interpretive categories. Such revisions often contribute to deeper reinterpretation of the data and refinement of the overall thematic structure. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize the importance of systematically documenting all analytical decisions and revisions throughout this phase in order to enhance methodological transparency and reflexivity. It also strengthens the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis.

Phase five: defining and naming theme

At this phase of reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher focuses on presenting and refining the final thematic framework in a clear, coherent, and analytically meaningful manner. Each theme and sub-theme is carefully defined and explained in relation to both the dataset and the research questions. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), themes should provide distinct yet interconnected accounts of the data, with each theme capturing a unique aspect of participants' experiences or perspectives. In line with Patton's (1990) principles of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, themes should demonstrate internal coherence while remaining clearly distinguishable from one another.

Defining themes requires the researcher to engage deeply with the underlying data extracts in order to clarify the central meaning communicated by each theme. At this stage, the researcher selects the most appropriate participant extracts to illustrate and support the analytical narrative. Braun and Clarke (2012) emphasize that selected extracts should be vivid, representative, and capable of demonstrating both the depth and diversity of meanings within a theme. Importantly, the researcher is expected to move beyond merely describing participants' statements by providing interpretive analysis that explains the significance of the extracts in relation to the broader research questions and existing literature.

The presentation of findings may take either an illustrative or an analytical orientation. An illustrative approach focuses primarily on describing participants' accounts, while an analytical approach engages more critically with the data by interpreting underlying meanings and connecting them to theoretical and scholarly discussions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Nevertheless, regardless of the reporting style adopted, reflexive thematic analysis remains fundamentally interpretive in nature and therefore requires the researcher to provide analytical insight

rather than simple description of the data. Consequently, reflexive thematic analysis encourages researchers to produce findings that are theoretically informed, contextually grounded, and analytically persuasive.

Another important task during this phase involves reviewing and finalizing the names assigned to themes and sub-themes. Braun and Clarke (2020) argue that theme names should be concise, engaging, and capable of immediately conveying the essence of the theme to the reader. Rather than relying solely on descriptive labels, researchers are encouraged to develop memorable and creative theme names that effectively capture important dimensions of the data. In some cases, short participant quotations or striking phrases derived from the dataset may be incorporated into theme titles to strengthen the analytical and narrative impact of the findings.

Phase six: producing the report

In practice, the final phase is not something that only occurs after analysis is completed; rather, writing is integrated throughout the entire analytic process. As Braun and Clarke (2012) note, unlike quantitative research where analysis is typically completed before reporting begins, qualitative analysis—particularly reflexive thematic analysis—develops alongside the writing process in an iterative and interconnected manner.

Because of this close relationship between analysis and writing, the researcher frequently revisits earlier stages of the work. As codes and themes are refined or reinterpreted, corresponding adjustments are made to the written account. This requires careful documentation of analytical decisions, often through memos, reflective notes, and a research journal maintained throughout the study. By the end of this process, phase six involves consolidating and finalising a report that has often been developing from the early stages of analysis.

At this stage, the researcher also considers the most coherent and meaningful way to present the themes. The ordering of themes should follow a logical progression, allowing the analysis to unfold as a connected narrative. While each theme should be able to stand on its own as a meaningful account of part of the data, it should also contribute to a broader, integrated story when read alongside other themes. Braun and Clarke (2012) emphasize that themes should be both individually coherent and collectively meaningful, ensuring that the overall analysis communicates a clear and persuasive account of the dataset.

Practical Illustration of the Six Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis

To demonstrate how Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is conducted in practice, consider a hypothetical study exploring **lecturers' experiences of implementing Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) in Kenyan Universities**. One participant stated:

"Most lecturers were not adequately trained before the introduction of CBET. We had to learn many things on our own, and this made implementation difficult, especially during the first year."

This extract will be used to illustrate how the six phases of RTA are applied.

Phase One: Familiarization with the Data

The researcher begins by listening to interview recordings, transcribing them, and repeatedly reading the transcripts. During this process, initial reflections and observations are recorded.

For example, after reading the above extract several times, the researcher may write the following reflective notes:

- Participants frequently mention inadequate preparation for CBET implementation.
- There appears to be a recurring concern regarding professional development.
- Participants often describe implementation as a process of "learning by doing."

At this stage, no formal coding is undertaken. The objective is to develop a deep understanding of participants' experiences and the broader context of the study.

Phase Two: Generating Initial Codes

The researcher then identifies meaningful segments of data and assigns concise codes.

Interview Extract	Initial Codes
"Most lecturers were not adequately trained before the introduction of CBET."	Inadequate training; Lack of preparation
"We had to learn many things on our own."	Self-directed learning; Informal professional development
"This made implementation difficult."	Implementation challenges
"Especially during the first year."	Transition difficulties

At this stage, coding remains open and inclusive. The researcher seeks to capture all potentially relevant meanings rather than immediately reducing the data.

Phase Three: Generating Initial Themes

The researcher examines relationships among codes and begins grouping them into broader patterns of meaning.

Codes	Potential Theme
Inadequate training; Lack of preparation	Institutional preparedness
Self-directed learning; Informal professional development	Lecturer adaptation strategies
Implementation challenges; Transition difficulties	Challenges during CBET implementation

The researcher begins asking interpretive questions such as:

- What do these codes collectively reveal about lecturers' experiences?
- How do these patterns help answer the research question?
- What broader story is emerging from the data?

Through this process, broader thematic patterns begin to develop.

Phase Four: Reviewing and Refining Themes

The researcher revisits all coded extracts and compares them with the developing themes.

For example, the preliminary themes:

1. Institutional preparedness
2. Lecturer adaptation strategies
3. Challenges during CBET implementation; may be reviewed and revised into a more coherent thematic structure:

Theme 1: Institutional Unpreparedness for Curriculum Reform

Sub-theme 1.1: Inadequate staff training

Sub-theme 1.2: Limited implementation support

Theme 2: Lecturer Resilience and Adaptive Learning

Sub-theme 2.1: Self-directed professional learning

Sub-theme 2.2: Peer support networks

The researcher assesses whether the themes are internally coherent and sufficiently distinct from one another.

Phase Five: Defining and Naming Themes

At this stage, the researcher refines the meaning of each theme and develops concise yet analytically powerful names.

For instance:

Theme: Institutional Unpreparedness for Curriculum Reform

Definition:

This theme captures lecturers' perceptions that universities introduced CBET without providing adequate preparation, training, or implementation support, creating significant challenges during the transition process.

Supporting quotation:

"Most lecturers were not adequately trained before the introduction of CBET."

Rather than simply describing a lack of training, the researcher interprets this as evidence of broader organizational challenges associated with educational change management.

Similarly:

Theme: Lecturer Resilience and Adaptive Learning

Definition:

This theme reflects how lecturers responded to implementation challenges by engaging in self-directed learning and collaborative knowledge sharing to develop competencies required for CBET delivery.

Phase Six: Producing the Report

The final stage involves presenting themes as a coherent analytical narrative.

Example:

The findings revealed that the implementation of CBET was significantly shaped by institutional readiness. Participants consistently reported insufficient preparation prior to curriculum rollout, suggesting that organizational support structures were inadequate. Despite these challenges, lecturers demonstrated considerable resilience by engaging in self-directed learning and collaborative problem-solving. These findings indicate that successful curriculum reform requires not only policy directives but also sustained investment in staff capacity development and institutional support systems.

At this stage, participant quotations are integrated with analytical interpretation and linked to relevant literature and theoretical frameworks. The objective is not merely to report what participants said but to explain the broader significance of their experiences in relation to the research problem.

Enhancement of Rigor and Trustworthiness in Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Ensuring rigor and trustworthiness is a fundamental consideration in qualitative research because the credibility of findings depends largely on the transparency and quality of the analytical process. In Reflexive Thematic

Analysis (RTA), rigor is not established through statistical measures of reliability or objectivity but through methodological coherence, reflexive engagement, transparency, and the generation of rich and meaningful interpretations. Since researchers play an active role in constructing themes and interpreting data, demonstrating trustworthiness requires careful attention to how analytical decisions are made and justified throughout the research process.

One of the most important strategies for establishing rigor in RTA is reflexivity. Reflexivity refers to the continuous process through which researchers critically examine how their personal experiences, values, disciplinary backgrounds, assumptions, and theoretical perspectives influence the research process. Braun and Clarke (2019) argue that reflexivity is central to RTA because themes are not simply discovered within the data but are actively constructed through the researcher's interpretive engagement with participants' accounts. Consequently, researchers must acknowledge their role in shaping data interpretation rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity. Maintaining reflexive journals, research diaries, and analytic memos enables researchers to document evolving thoughts, assumptions, and decisions throughout the study. Such practices enhance transparency and allow readers to understand how interpretations were developed.

Another important mechanism for ensuring trustworthiness is maintaining an audit trail or decision trail. An audit trail involves systematically documenting all stages of the analytical process, including data familiarization, coding decisions, theme development, theme refinement, and final interpretation. According to Nowell et al. (2017), detailed documentation enables other researchers to follow the analytical pathway from raw data to final themes. This process strengthens dependability by demonstrating that interpretations were developed systematically rather than arbitrarily. An effective audit trail may include coded transcripts, thematic maps, reflective notes, analytic memos, and records explaining why certain codes, categories, or themes were retained, revised, merged, or discarded. Such documentation contributes significantly to methodological transparency and scholarly rigor.

Peer debriefing, sometimes referred to as engagement with "critical friends," also contributes to the credibility of thematic analysis. This strategy involves discussing developing interpretations, codes, and themes with supervisors, colleagues, or other researchers who are familiar with qualitative inquiry. Through such discussions, researchers are exposed to alternative perspectives that may challenge assumptions or reveal overlooked dimensions of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that critical dialogue helps strengthen interpretations by encouraging researchers to justify their analytical decisions and consider competing explanations. In reflexive thematic analysis, peer debriefing is not intended to achieve consensus or inter-coder agreement but rather to deepen critical reflection and analytical sophistication.

The provision of thick description is another essential strategy for enhancing trustworthiness. Thick description involves presenting detailed contextual information about the research setting, participants, and findings, supported by carefully selected participant quotations. Geertz (1973) argues that rich description enables readers to understand the social and cultural context within which participants' experiences occur. In thematic analysis, participant extracts serve as evidence supporting the researcher's interpretations while simultaneously allowing readers to evaluate the credibility of those interpretations. By providing sufficient contextual detail, researchers enhance the transferability of findings, enabling readers to determine the extent to which the results may be applicable to other contexts, settings, or populations.

Member checking, also known as participant validation, is another strategy sometimes employed to strengthen credibility. This process involves sharing preliminary findings or thematic interpretations with participants and inviting feedback regarding the accuracy or resonance of the analysis. While member checking has traditionally been viewed as a means of enhancing trustworthiness, its value within reflexive thematic analysis remains contested. Braun and Clarke (2019) caution that participants may interpret their experiences differently over time and may not necessarily agree with broader analytical interpretations developed across multiple cases. Furthermore, because RTA recognizes that themes are co-constructed through researcher interpretation, participant agreement is not regarded as the sole indicator of validity. Nevertheless, where appropriate, participant feedback can provide useful insights that contribute to the refinement of interpretations.

A further consideration concerns the concept of data saturation. Traditionally, qualitative researchers have viewed saturation as the point at which no new information or themes emerge from the data. However, Braun and Clarke (2021) challenge the applicability of saturation within reflexive thematic analysis, arguing that meaning-making is an ongoing and interpretive process. From this perspective, analysis can always generate new insights depending on the theoretical lens applied. Consequently, RTA places less emphasis on achieving saturation and greater emphasis on collecting sufficiently rich and meaningful data to address the research questions. The focus shifts from completeness to depth, complexity, and the generation of insightful interpretations. Researchers are therefore encouraged to justify sample adequacy based on information power, richness of data, and the analytical objectives of the study rather than solely on saturation claims.

Systematic engagement with the entire dataset also contributes significantly to analytical rigor. Researchers must ensure that coding and theme development are informed by comprehensive engagement with all relevant data rather than selective attention to extracts that support preconceived assumptions. Braun and Clarke (2012) emphasize the importance of giving equal consideration to diverse participant perspectives, including contradictory or less dominant viewpoints. Such comprehensive engagement minimizes the risk of confirmation bias and enhances the credibility of the final thematic framework. Themes should therefore reflect patterns across the dataset while remaining sensitive to complexity, variation, and nuance within participants' accounts.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis in Relation to Other Qualitative Approaches

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) shares certain characteristics with other qualitative methodologies but differs significantly in its philosophical assumptions, analytical objectives, and expected outcomes. Understanding these distinctions helps researchers justify the selection of RTA as an appropriate method for analyzing qualitative data.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Grounded Theory

RTA and Grounded Theory both involve systematic engagement with qualitative data through coding and interpretation. However, their primary objectives differ substantially. Grounded Theory seeks to develop a substantive or formal theory that explains a social process, action, or interaction ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). Data collection and analysis occur simultaneously through constant comparison and theoretical sampling until theoretical sufficiency is achieved. In contrast, RTA does not aim to generate theory. Rather, it seeks to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). While Grounded Theory focuses on theory construction, RTA focuses on thematic understanding and meaning-making.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Narrative Inquiry

Narrative Inquiry is concerned with understanding how individuals construct and communicate meaning through stories. The emphasis is placed on the structure, sequence, and context of participants' narratives, often preserving the integrity of individual stories ([Clandinin & Connelly, 2000](#)). RTA, on the other hand, typically examines patterns across multiple participants rather than focusing on individual life stories. Whereas Narrative Inquiry seeks to understand how people make sense of their experiences through storytelling, RTA aims to identify broader themes that illuminate shared meanings and experiences across a dataset. Consequently, Narrative Inquiry prioritizes individual narratives, while RTA prioritizes thematic patterns across participants.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is rooted in phenomenology and is primarily concerned with exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). IPA usually employs small, homogeneous samples and involves detailed case-by-case analysis before identifying points of convergence and divergence across participants. RTA differs in both scope and analytical focus. Rather than conducting an in-depth examination of individual lived experiences, RTA seeks to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset as a whole. Furthermore, while IPA is grounded in a specific phenomenological and

hermeneutic tradition, RTA is theoretically flexible and can be applied within diverse epistemological frameworks.

Although Grounded Theory, Narrative Inquiry, IPA, and RTA all seek to generate meaningful insights from qualitative data, they differ in their analytical goals. Grounded Theory aims to develop explanatory theory; Narrative Inquiry seeks to understand human experience through stories; IPA focuses on the interpretation of lived experience; and RTA aims to identify and interpret patterns of shared meaning across a dataset. The flexibility of RTA, combined with its accessibility and applicability across different theoretical perspectives, makes it particularly suitable for researchers interested in exploring participants’ experiences without the methodological requirements of theory generation, narrative reconstruction, or phenomenological interpretation.

Table 1: Comparison of Qualitative Data Analysis Approaches

Aspect	Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)	Grounded Theory	Narrative Inquiry	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
Main Purpose	Identify and interpret patterns of meaning	Develop theory from data	Explore stories and narratives	Understand lived experiences
Focus of Analysis	Themes across the dataset	Social processes and interactions	Individual stories and life accounts	Individual meaning-making
Sample Size	Small to large	Moderate to large	Usually small	Small and homogeneous
Outcome	Themes and interpretations	Substantive/formal theory	Narrative accounts	Phenomenological insights
Role of Theory	Flexible; may be inductive or theoretical	Theory emerges from data	Narrative and contextual frameworks	Phenomenological and hermeneutic theory
Researcher Role	Active interpreter	Theory developer	Narrative co-constructor	Interpretive analyst
Unit of Analysis	Patterns across participants	Processes and categories	Individual narratives	Individual cases before cross-case analysis

Source: Researcher, (2026)

CONCLUSION

Thematic analysis remains a powerful and versatile qualitative analytical approach. However, its scholarly value depends on the extent to which researchers move beyond descriptive categorization to engage in theoretically informed interpretation. Contemporary developments, particularly reflexive thematic analysis, have repositioned the method as a dynamic and epistemologically sophisticated approach that acknowledges researcher subjectivity, embraces analytical reflexivity, and facilitates theory generation. When applied rigorously and coherently, thematic analysis not only identifies patterns within qualitative data but also provides critical insights into the social, cultural, and institutional processes that shape human experiences and behaviors.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is a flexible and theoretically informed qualitative data that seeks to identify, interpret, and construct patterns of meaning across a dataset. Unlike approaches that prioritize coding reliability or theory generation, RTA acknowledges the researcher as an active participant in the knowledge-production process, recognizing that themes are not discovered but are developed through reflexive engagement with the data.

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