# Resource sheet: the basics of qualitative analysis

"One of the main difficulties with qualitative research is that it very rapidly generates a large, cumbersome database because of its reliance on prose in the form of such media as field notes, interview transcripts and documents."

(Bryman, 2008: 538)

Where does analysis fit into the qualitative research process?

Figure one shows the different steps in the qualitative research process. Analysis follows data collection. When analysing data, we also need to anticipate the next two steps: writing up the analysis and communicating and disseminating the findings. This is especially important for ELC programmes since they are built on the principle that continuous feedback to affected people is an "always" event

Figure one: key steps in the qualitative research process
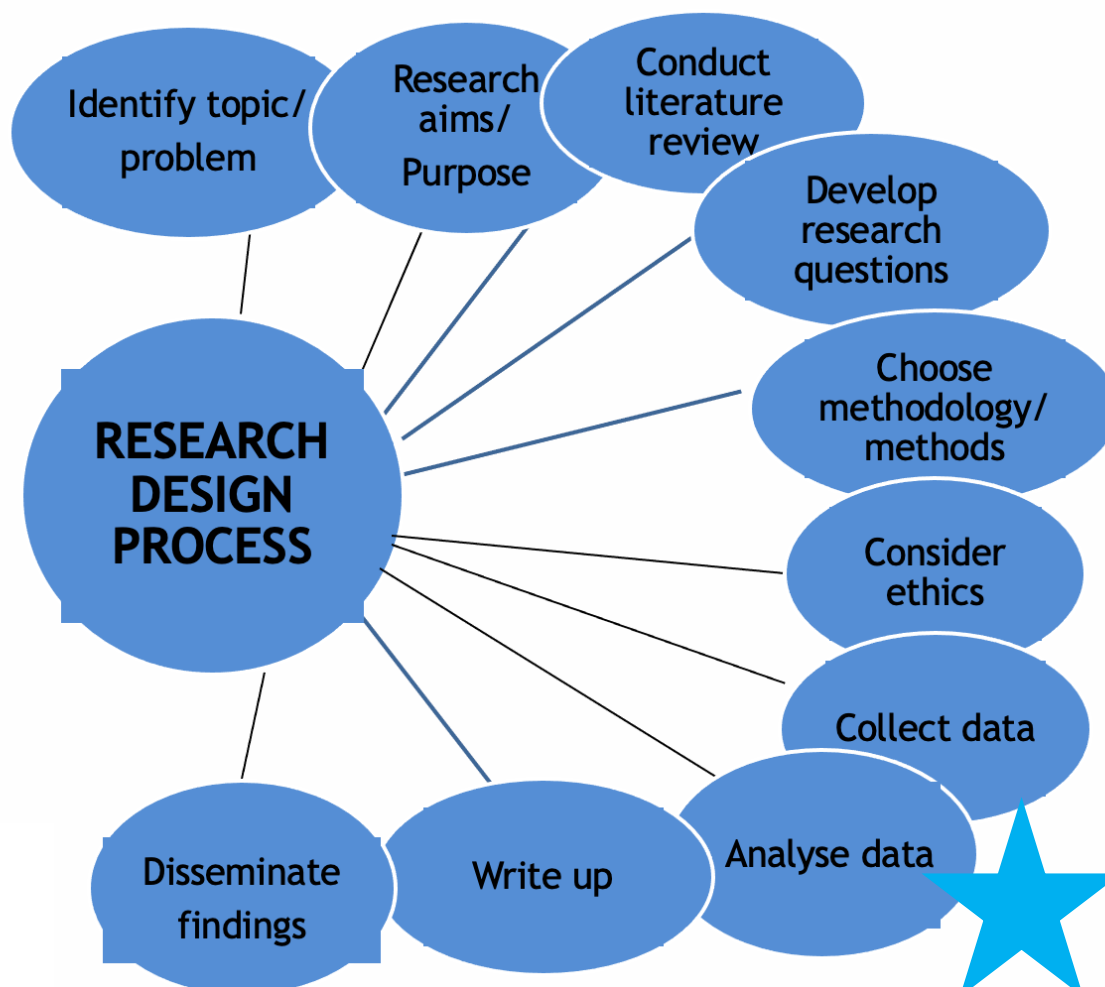
What is thematic analysis?

Very simply, thematic analysis is about taking often complex sets of data and information and putting together the pieces of this jigsaw to create a complete picture, story and narrative that describes what we have discovered by bringing together the data we already have with the data collected by ELC Practitioners from the selected communities of interest during our discovery work.

What is thematic analysis?

Thematic analysis provides the foundation for ELC discovery data analysis. Thematic analysis It is strongly influenced by Grounded Theory (GT), conceptualised by Glaser & Strauss, and first published in 1967[1]. The Discovery tools ELC uses lend themselves well to thematic analysis.

What is Grounded Theory (GT)?

GT is a systematic methodology that aims to develop several theories from data being analysed and the development of an overarching theory that 'explains' the findings within the data.

In GT, emerging analysis does and should inform and focus future data collection so that data collection and analysis become an interactive process that generates concepts and a narrative that, over time, explain people's actions.

GT is characterised:

- By relatively large maximum variation samples (often 40 or more interviews)
- By using coding as a way of organising data into manageable units aided by CAQDAS software e.g. NVivo
- Happening on an on-going basis, alongside the process of data collection
- Being illustrated with extracts or verbatim quotes from data e.g. field notes or interviews.

GT sampling is purposive and theoretical. We seek and collect pertinent data to help to elaborate and refine emerging our theoretical categories (themes).

GT analysis involves:

1. Undertaking constant comparison of the data
2. Identify surprising findings - known as 'deviant case analysis'
3. Coding and categorising data so that it can be themed

Common terms linked to thematic analysis are data saturation, constant comparison, sensitising concepts, and iterative, reflexive inductive analysis

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[1]Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm Strauss. The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Co, 1967

REMEMBER: when using GT, emerging analysis does and should inform and focus future data collection.

From GT theory to practice

In most cases, thematic analysis is a modified rather than a pure form of GT.

Qualitative researchers often use a combination of pre-defined categories (or codes) and add new ones as they emerge out of the data.

While GT pre-supposes that researchers approach data from entirely neutral point of view, in practice, this is impossible.

Organising and analysing data is not an objective task.

Researchers bring knowledge, literature, and theory to the task. Data is a social construct of reality. The researchers collecting and analysing data, in collaboration with participants in the discovery process, construct meaning in the data. Many researchers have hypotheses in mind when they code data.

Researchers need to mindful of this subjectivity and their conscious and unconscious biases.

To count or not to count in thematic analysis

It is tempting to focus on the number of times people mention an emotion or similar aspect of experience and conclude that it is more important than others that are mentioned less frequently.

Whilst there remains debate in academic circles, ELC discovery work seeks to describe the full range of experiences.

For this reason, we do not count how many people mention something. Whether something is mentioned once or lots of times, we value each equally.

The key phases of analysis:

There are two phases to analysis:

- **Data management:** the goal of this phase is to organise the data by developing a coding framework, coding, and categorising data
- **Interpreting qualitative data: the goal of this phase is to find the story in the data, using the one sheet of paper (OSOP) method**

In finding the answer to your focus (research) question, interpretation is the most important phase. It is heavily dependent on effective data management.

How do we code and categorise data?

Codes are labels to attach to chunks of information. Codes serve as shorthand devices to label, separate, compile and organise data and capture the essence of what the person is saying at that point. Codes might come from: emotional touchpoints, reading literature and designing interview guide, immersing yourself in the data as you collect it; noting down emerging codes as you collect data.

Example codes include:

- Demographic e.g. age, gender, ethnicity
- Factual e.g. types of tests and treatment received
- Descriptive e.g. family relationships; communication with professionals
- Interpretive or conceptual e.g. fear/anxiety; body image; stigma

Categories are groups of codes that relate to each other in some way.

A coding framework is like a filing cabinet, with drawers (categories) and files (codes).

The process of coding involves going through each interview or other data and moving chunks of data into the right drawer and file in the filing cabinet in a place that you can find it again.

Tips to help you with your framework:

- You can put the same chunk of information (code) in several different categories
- You can keep codes big e.g. 'reaction to the diagnosis' or sub-divide it
- You choose what size of text chunk to code
- Avoid getting too tidy too soon. Be flexible. Hold on to complexity
- Recognise data management is a staged process
- Revisit the framework and add new codes and categories as they emerge throughout the coding process

Assign data to codes

1. Read through all the data: what is the data telling you?
2. As you read each piece or data or transcript, record your initial reactions to data in margin (words, short phrases). Your purpose at this stage is simply to DESCRIBE the data and what is it telling you. Note what strikes you as interesting about the data
3. Start to think about what do the data tell you about how society is structured and the concepts that are emerging; what is 'sociologically interesting' about your data in preparation for the OSOP
4. Pick an initial sample of data e.g. a small number of interview transcripts; 10 surveys and start to code this data
5. As you start to code this data, keep a record of each code. Note each code and a short descriptor in a small notebook. This journal is essential to keep track of the progress of your coding and analysis
6. Use this initial analysis to build your initial coding framework

Sort codes in categories

Once you have sorted the data into codes, you begin to develop a coding framework.

1. Group related codes into categories. You may merge some codes
2. **Keep a record of these changes**

REMEMBER: coding is an iterative process and your coding framework may change throughout the process

Example coding framework: osteoporosis

Diagnosis	Treatments & interventions	Managing OP
What is OP? Being diagnosed DXA scans & other tests Who develops OP?	Medication Physiotherapy & hydrotherapy Surgery Complementary therapies	Pain & other physical problems Pain & medication Food, diet & supplements Smoking & drinking alcohol Exercise
Information & support	Doctor-patient communication	Living with OP
Information needs Sources of information National organisations & local support groups	Communicating with health professionals Advice to doctors & nurses	Impact on home Family, friends & support Mobility, driving & transport Work & finances Social life, leisure & holidays

What is the one sheet of paper (OSOP) method?

An OSOP is way of helping you to make sense of and find the story in the data.

The key steps in developing an OSOP are:

1. Read through all the data in the category
2. On the OSOP, note all the different issues raised by the coded extracts in the category
3. When OSOP is complete, you will have a summary of all issues
4. Consider how the issues group together into broader themes

5. Develop an explanation of 'what is going on in the data', considering all the issues raised - not just the most mentioned issues

Example OSOP for lung cancer: code stigma and shame

How does improving the quality of the data ELC Practitioners collect facilitate analysis?

When ELC Practitioners understand how analysts work with the discovery data collected through discovery work, it helps us to understand the importance of a rigorous approach to data collection.

Remember to:

- Be aware of your own bias (conscious and unconscious)
- Make sure you actively listen and record the exact words that people use to make sure you do not add your own interpretation and meaning to what they say to you
- Note everything that people say. Remember that the things that one person says once matters as much as the things everyone says
- Keep a notebook and make a note of the emerging code and categories and themes you notice as you talk to people
- Work closely with your analysis people. Share your thoughts on emerging codes and categories with them
- Get together and discuss the findings that surprised you after you have done the first few discovery sessions
- Get together after the analysts have codes and categorised the first set of data to discuss and sense check the emerging coding framework
- Review whether there are issues and questions that you should start to ask about on future discovery sessions so that the processes of data collection and analysis are iterative and continuously evolving
- Maintain an open dialogue throughout the process of data collection and analysis
- When analysis is completed, organise a session to come together and review the story that has emerged from the data. Be open to challenging each other and sense checking if this aligns with what you heard from your communities of interest