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A Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis

Abstract

Ethnographic interviews have become a commonly used qualitat ive methodology for collecting data (Aronson, 1992). Once the information is gathered, res earchers are faced with the decision on how to analyze the data. There are many ways to anal yze informants' talk about their experiences (Mahrer, 1988; Spradley, 1979; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), a nd thematic analysis is one such way. Although thematic analysis has been described (Benner, 1985; Leininger, 1985; Taylor & Board, 1984), there is insufficient literature that outlines the pragmatic process of thematic analysis. This article attempts to outline the procedure for perform ing a thematic analysis.

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A Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis

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Ethnographic interviews have become a commonly used qualitative methodology for collecting data (Aronson, 1992). Once the information is gathered, researchers are faced with the decision on how to analyze the data. There are many ways to analyze informants' talk about their experiences (Mahrer, 1988; Spradley, 1979; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), and thematic analysis is one such way.

Although thematic analysis has been described (Benner, 1985; Leininger, 1985; Taylor & Board, 1984), there is insufficient literature that outlines the pragmatic process of thematic analysis. This article attempts to outline the procedure for performing a thematic analysis.

Performing a Thematic Analysis

The ethnographic interview is a commonly used interviewing process employed by research-clinicians (Kuehl & Newfield, 1991; Kuehl, Newfield & Joanning, 1990; Newfield, Joanning, Kuehl, & Quinn, 1990; Newfield, Kuehl, Joanning & Quinn, 1991; William, 1992). From the conversations that take place in a therapy session or those that are encouraged for the sake of researching a process, ideas emerge that can be better understood under the control of a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behavior.

The first step is to collect the data. Audiotapes should be collected to study the talk of a session or of an enthnographic interview (Spradley, 1979). From the transcribed conversations, patterns of experiences can be listed. This can come from direct quotes or paraphrasing common ideas. The following is an example.

A family was interviewed to get a better understanding of their experience with a juvenile justice system. The entire interview was transcribed. The first pattern of experience listed, was the process of the juvenile being arrested, and the different explanations from the various family members. The second pattern of experience listed was the attitude that each family member had toward the process (Aronson, 1992).

The next step to a thematic analysis is to identify all data that relate to the already classified patterns. To continue the above example, the identified patterns are then expounded on. All of the talk that fits under the specific pattern is identified and placed with the corresponding pattern. For example, each family member somehow named their "attitude" while they were speaking. The father stated that he is "anti-statist," the mother said that she is "protective," and the son stated that "felt bad for what he had done" (Aronson, 1992).

The next step to a thematic analysis is to combine and catalogue related patterns into sub-themes. Themes are defined as units derived from patterns such as "conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989, p.131). Themes are identified by "bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone" (Leininger, 1985, p. 60). Themes that emerge from the informants' stories are pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of their collective experience. The "coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together" (Leininger, 1985, p. 60). Constas (1992) reiterates this point and states that the "interpretative approach should be considered as a distinct point of origination" (p. 258).

When gathering sub-themes to obtain a comprehensive view of the information, it is easy to see a pattern emerging. When patterns emerge it is best to obtain feedback from the informants about them. This can be done as the interview is taking place or by asking the informants to give feedback from the transcribed conversations. In the former, the interviewer uses the informants' feedback to establish the next questions in the interview. In the latter, the interviewer transcribes the interview or the session, and asks the informants to provide feedback that is then incorporated in the theme analysis.

The next step is to build a valid argument for choosing the themes. This is done by reading the related literature. By referring back to the literature, the interviewer gains information that allows him or herself to make inferences from the interview or therapy session. Once the themes have been collected and the literature has been studied, the researcher is ready to formulate theme statements to develop a story line. When the literature is interwoven with the findings, the story that the interviewer constructs is one that stands with merit. A developed story line helps the reader to comprehend the process, understanding, and motivation of the interviewer.

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