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Not Just for Beginners - A Review of Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners

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Abstract

In *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (2013), Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke present their method of thematic analysis as well as some strategies for successfully conducting qualitative research. The book is user-friendly and contains practical advice that may appeal to both novices and experienced researchers alike.

Keywords

Thematic Analysis, Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Research Methods

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Not Just for Beginners – A Review of *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*

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In Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners (2013), Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke present their method of thematic analysis as well as some strategies for successfully conducting qualitative research. The book is user-friendly and contains practical advice that may appeal to both novices and experienced researchers alike. Keywords: Thematic Analysis, Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Research Methods

Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke is designed for undergraduate and first-year graduate students as well as more established researchers with limited experience using qualitative methodology. Their objective in writing the textbook is to ensure that beginners “*really get it...[so they]...know how to actually go about doing a qualitative research project*” (p. 3). In my opinion, the authors achieve their objective nicely. I learned a few new things from the text and I’ve been using qualitative methods to evaluate public health care programs for a number of years. Consequently, a more suitable title for the text might be *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide* or perhaps *A Practical Guide to Successful Qualitative Research* because experienced researchers can also benefit from reading it.

Braun and Clarke’s book is user-friendly and contains many helpful strategies and tips for conducting qualitative research; however, their discussion on thematic analysis stands out. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative analytic method, but it is often poorly described (or not even labeled) as a method by many researchers because very little written guidance exists on what thematic analysis is or on how it should be applied.

Braun and Clarke help fill this gap by describing thematic analysis in a way that is both methodologically and theoretically sound. They define thematic analysis as a method for identifying themes (or patterns of meaning) across a dataset in relation to a research question, describing it as “relatively unique among qualitative analytic methods in that it only provides a method for data analysis; it does not prescribe methods of data collection, theoretical positions, epistemological or ontological frameworks. It really is just a method” (p. 178). The authors argue that the method is flexible and can be used to answer almost any type of research question using almost any type of data and/or theoretical orientation as long as the analysis is crafted in such a way that it matches what the researchers want to know. As an evaluator in a large government agency, I work in a public policy environment that is subject to the influence of a diverse group of stakeholders (e.g., elected officials, government administrators, special interest advocates, program participants, and concerned citizens). Therefore, I need to utilize research methods that are not tied to any specific view, ideology, or theoretical orientation in order to produce evaluations that appeal to a wide audience. By developing a “generic” approach to thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke offer a helpful method that can be used to evaluate programs that meet the needs of different stakeholders.

After introducing thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke offer practical guidance for applying it in a consistent and rigorous manner. The method is composed of seven stages beginning with transcription and culminating in report writing (Table 1).

Table 1. Braun and Clarke's Seven Stages of Thematic Analysis

Stage	Thematic Analysis	Description
1	Transcription	Turning audio data into written text (or transcripts) by writing down what was said and how it was said so the data can be systematically coded and analyzed.
2	Reading & Familiarization	Reading and re-reading the data to become intimately familiar with the content (i.e., immersion); analysis begins by noticing things of interest that might be relevant to the research questions.
3	Coding (Selective & Complete)	Identifying aspects of the data that relate to the research questions; can involve <i>selective coding</i> where only material of interest is coded or <i>complete coding</i> where the entire dataset is coded.
4	Searching for Themes	Identifying salient features that capture something important about the data in relation to the research question; may represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the dataset.
5	Reviewing Themes	Determining whether candidate themes fit well with the coded data; themes should tell a story (not necessarily <i>the story</i>) that "rings true" with the data; essentially represents quality control in relation to the analysis.
6	Defining & Naming Themes	Defining themes by stating what is unique and specific about each one; useful because it forces researchers to define the focus and boundaries of the themes by distilling to a few short sentences what each theme is about.
7	Writing the Report	Writing the report by selecting compelling, vivid examples of data extracts, and relating them back to the research question and literature.

Braun and Clarke (2013), pp. 202–203.

A unique feature of the text is that Braun and Clarke dedicate an entire chapter to transcription (which is not typically done), arguing that it is an important part of analysis because it allows researchers to gain familiarity with the data, preparing them for the next stage of analysis that involves familiarization (or immersion) by reading the data repeatedly to develop a sense of what information might be important for answering the research questions. Another unique feature of the text is that Braun and Clarke discuss three other common approaches to pattern-based analysis (i.e., interpretative phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, and discourse analysis) and then compare and contrast these approaches with thematic analysis. The discussion is clear and engaging, yet detailed enough to inform readers about these other approaches. Finally, the authors intersperse examples of codes, themes, and thematic maps throughout the discussion using data from a focus group conducted specifically for the textbook. These examples illustrate analytical concepts to help researchers logically analyze and understand the volume of data that accumulate when conducting qualitative research.

Additional favorable features of the textbook include its organizational structure, which the authors divide into four sections that can be read either consecutively or separately depending on the needs of the reader. The first section provides an overview of some basic issues that researchers need to consider when undertaking qualitative projects, while the second covers interviews and focus groups along with a few textual analysis approaches that are appropriate for small-scale, time-limited projects. The third section consists of five chapters on qualitative data analysis, concluding with a practical analytic demonstration using focus group data. The final section contains guidance for ensuring that qualitative research meets high standards of excellence including some very helpful techniques on disseminating resultant findings and implications through presentations, posters, and reports. Other features include several examples of data collection forms (e.g., participant information sheet, consent/confidentiality agreement, and demographic questionnaire) in the interview and focus group chapters and the end-of-chapter exercises and suggestions for additional reading that encourage students and beginners to develop a deeper understanding of the main issues raised in the text.

In addition, the book's website (<http://www.sagepub.com/braunandclarke/main.htm>.) contains information that can be used for both self-study as well as for teaching others about qualitative data collection and analysis procedures. For example, the website contains interactive multiple choice questions, electronic flipcards, examples of actual qualitative data, research poster and PowerPoint® slide examples, journal articles illustrating important concepts, and various data collection tools. Basically, the website provides a wealth of information on qualitative research and data analysis procedures.

Overall, Braun and Clarke's book touches on many of the key theoretical and practical issues involved with qualitative research. The text could potentially appeal to a wider audience if the authors had included additional research examples from fields other than psychology (both Braun and Clarke are psychologists), such as anthropology, education, evaluation, management, or social work. It would also be helpful to include more information on the central features of the various forms of qualitative research design in chapter 3 (which is on planning and designing qualitative research) to help set the stage for the analysis and presentation discussions that follow in the third and fourth sections of the text. However, these issues are minor and do not detract from the many positive features of the book.

In sum, this textbook presents a highly accessible introduction to thematic analysis and general qualitative research procedures that should appeal to both students and researchers alike. While the book could easily serve as a main text for undergraduate or master's degree programs, it would also be appropriate to use as a reference guide for doctoral students seeking to develop a more thorough understanding of qualitative data collection and analysis procedures. In addition, the text could be included in the professional libraries of beginning and more experienced qualitative researchers who may need a reference for a generic analytical method that can be crafted to fit within different theoretical paradigms. The text is definitely included in my professional library and I would recommend it to researchers who need a good reference for analyzing qualitative data.

References

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Author Note

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