Chapter 20 Developing Theme Passages

Skill

Write themes that capture the evidence for participants, codes, and quotations into your findings.

Why the Skill Is Important

Themes are the major findings in a qualitative study. Qualitative data tend to be dense data, and we cannot use all the information we gather. Consequently, we take the data, such as transcripts of interviews, and collapse them into codes during our qualitative data analysis. However, in a qualitative database, especially a large one consisting of many pages of text, we will have many codes, and these cannot all be reported in the findings of a study. We must collapse the codes into themes. These themes represent the "findings" in a qualitative study, and as I have mentioned earlier, we identify a small number of themes (say five to seven) and write passages about each one of them. The most popular form of analyzing text data is a thematic analysis (Kuckartz, 2014), although others may be found in the literature, such as analyzing data into a priori evaluative categories, or into typologies. A thematic approach will be taken here, and the challenge now becomes how to actually write a theme passage. Thus, it is important to learn about several aspects of this theme passage—how it relates to the overall data analysis procedure, what components go into it, and an illustration of what a final theme passage in a qualitative study looks like.

Four Levels of Evidence in Qualitative Data Analysis

A theme in a qualitative study presents evidence for the central phenomenon in the study. In qualitative data analysis, the raw data provide information you have gathered to help explain your central phenomenon. These data are then coded through the process of reading through the text (or viewing the pictures) and assigning code labels to the text or images. This process I described in Chapters 18 and 19. I further encouraged you to consider "lean coding" and to come up with a small number of codes, such as 20, regardless of the size of your database. These codes are then collapsed into themes, a label is affixed to each theme, and the theme then becomes a subheading in the "findings" section of your qualitative study. Sometimes these themes are related to one another to form a chronological storyline (Plano Clark et al., 2002). These themes might be further aggregated into dimensions or combined into a figure that provides an explanation for the central phenomenon. These dimensions or figures are often found in the discussion section of a qualitative study. In short, the process flows inductively from the data to larger dimensions or figures, with the evidence being collapsed into smaller and smaller units of information during the process of data analysis (see Figure 18.3 for a visual of this process). Thus, I see the evidence you gather collapsing into four levels, as shown in Figure 20.1: the raw data, the codes, the themes, and larger dimensions or figures.

A good theme passage in a study contains a theme label, multiple codes, quotations, and multiple sources of information.

Elements to Write Into Themes

The basic idea of writing a theme passage is to present the complexity of a theme on the basis of evidence collected during a study. I see this theme passage as having several components:

- A theme label that is clear and conceptually interesting
- Multiple codes that provide evidence for the theme
- Quotations that offer the voices of participants and add realism to the theme passage
- Views from multiple participants in the study (or from multiple sources of information)

Figure 20.1 Four Levels of Evidence Used in Qualitative Data Analysis

It should be helpful to first see a complete theme passage with these parts. Recall that in Chapter 18, I provided an example of a theme passage with these parts that related to the theme of "safety" from my study of a campus reaction to a gunman (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995). In Figure 20.2, I change the illustration but convey similar parts that I mentioned earlier and then elaborate on each part. This passage on tobacco use by adolescents was found in the "findings" of a journal article (Plano Clark et al., 2002).
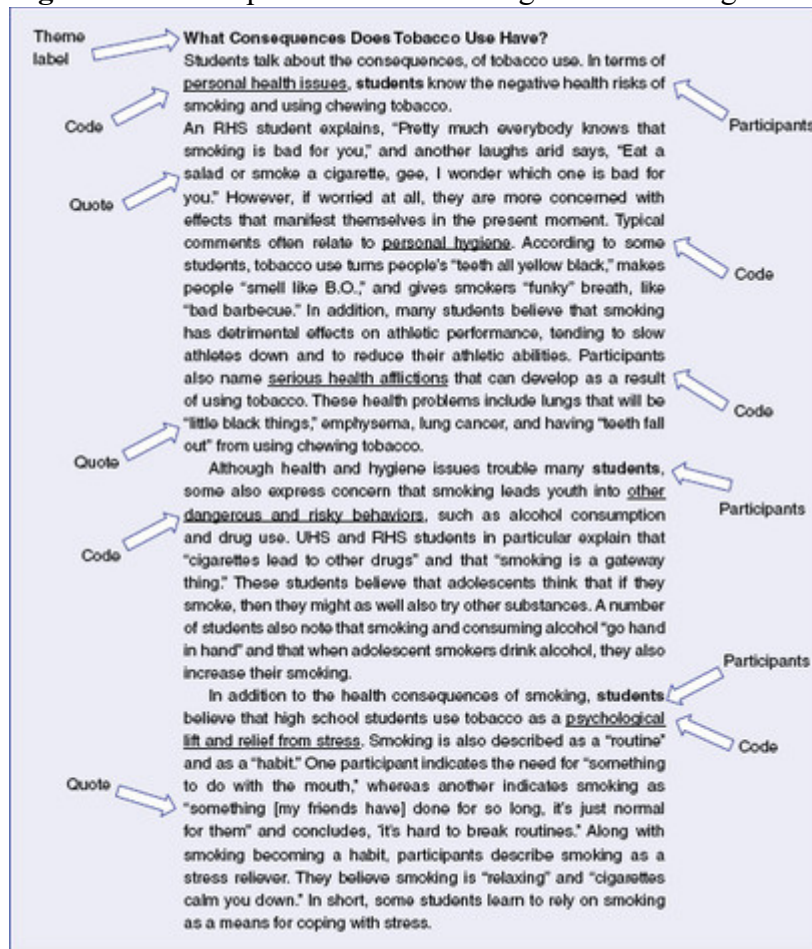
Theme Labels

A theme label is similar to a code label and perhaps more important because it needs to stand on its own in the findings section of a study and be easily understood by readers. The themes become subheadings in the findings section of a qualitative report. The best theme label would be an "in vivo" label—a short phrase mentioned by one of the participants. A theme label would not be the same as the central phenomenon being explored; indeed, the themes help explain or show evidence for the central phenomenon. This theme label could be placed in a findings section surrounded by quotation marks to signal to a reader that the theme represents the exact words used by participants in a study. This label should be short and easily understood by readers. It could have two parts, with the first consisting of words from a participant and the second based on the overall meaning of the words. It should not be so broad that its meaning is lost, for example, "Personal Experiences." Think about conveying to readers conceptually interesting theme labels in your study. Here are a few examples of what I have found to be interesting labels that would encourage me to read on in a project. These examples illustrate a two-part theme label, the use of questions, and a label that creates reader interest:

Example 1

Theme labels in a pilot study exploring the cultural construction of egg donation through women donor narratives (K. Brockhage, personal communication, December 2014):

- "Why would you want someone else to have your child?" The importance of genetics
- "Everything was natural except for a small, little scientific procedure" Discourses that reinforce nontraditional conception and motherhood

Figure 20.2 Example of a Theme Passage in the Findings Section of a Journal Article

Source: Plano Clark et al. (2002).

Example 2

Theme labels in a pilot study exploring the virtual climate among individuals who frequent a pro–anorexia nervosa Web site called Ana (M. Butchko, personal communication, December 2014):

- "In it to win it"
- "Need for connection"
- "Feeling and thinking 'fat'"
- "Love/hate relationship with Ana"
- "Drive for thinness"

Example 3

Theme labels in a project exploring the messages from advisers to doctoral students (J. Stephenson-Abeetz, personal communication, December 2001):

- "You really have to plan it out": Messages about the importance of timing
- "It's what you learn from the silence": The power of ambient messages
- "I don't want my advisor to look down on me": Messages of negotiation

Different Codes

In a good theme passage, the reader should be able to easily identify the codes that constitute the evidence for the themes. Multiple codes often provide this evidence, and the qualitative researcher can emphasize the different codes by underlining them (as I have done in my illustration in Figure 20.1). The codes thread through the theme passage, and each code provides a slightly different perspective about each theme. In this way, the reader learns about the multiple ways people (or situations) provide evidence for a theme. As we learned in Chapter 1, a core element of qualitative research consists of providing multiple perspectives about a central phenomenon.

Different Quotations

Also included in a theme passage would be short quotations from participants. These quotations will add realism to the theme passage and provide the reader with specifics about how the participants talked about the theme. Hopefully these quotations will provide different perspectives and add to the complexity of the theme. The quotations need to be short, and typically I include short phrases instead of complete sentences or paragraphs. These quotations are set in quotation marks to highlight that they are the words of participants. I try to draw in quotations from different individuals to add variety. Sometimes the quotations can be arrayed one after another to illustrate different perspectives, as shown in this example where team members commented on how face-to-face meetings affected the workings of a team (K. James, personal communication, December 2011):

"Group meetings were good and needed to be more. When you're alone in your office it is easy to get distracted so face-to-face is much more effective."

"Continue funding for future projects so that face-to-face opportunities are a possibility and a necessity."

"Face-to-face is always the best. It allows for ideas to be bounced around better."

During the process of reviewing transcripts, I try to identify quotations that will illustrate the codes and then the themes. In observing, I like to capture what people are saying and keep in mind the use of the quotations to provide detailed evidence for my themes.

Different Individuals

In Figure 20.1, I also included perspectives from different individuals or different sources of data. If a qualitative project unfolds with the collection of multiple data sources, I try to include evidence from each data source in the theme passage. Information from interviews, from observations, from documents, and from visual materials will be included in my theme passage. These multiple sources of information will also provide multiple perspectives for my theme passage.

A Table That Organizes Themes, Codes, and Quotations

Because there are many codes in a qualitative project and they are aggregated into themes and illustrated with quotations, qualitative researchers often present in their "findings" sections tables that show an overview of the interrelationship among these three aspects of research. In Table 20.1, I provide an illustration of a sample table that a student developed in a pilot project on the motivation of college-age students to drink alcohol (C. Temmen, personal communication, December 2014).

In this table you can identify multiple codes for each theme and several examples of quotations that accurately reflect the codes and themes.

TABLE 20.1 An Illustrative Table for Presenting the Themes, Codes, and Quotations in a Qualitative Findings Section

Themes	Codes	Examples of Quotations
Drinking to socialize	Social environment	"I drink about half the time I'm in a big social environment. Like a house party I'll usually drink, besides that it doesn't matter."
Drinking to relieve stress	Week activities	"It was such a stressful week because we had been planning and there was more alcohol than I thought there would be."
Drinking to relax	Before sleep	"I'll have a gin and tonic or something before I go to bed sometimes. It really helps. It's relaxing."
Drinking because of curiosity	Finding out for myself	"I am gonna find out for myself. So I did."
Drinking to feel a sense of community	Connections	"You kind of have like this weird connection with everyone else that you're with."

Summary

Qualitative themes are the results or findings in a study that present evidence for the central phenomenon. The process of deriving themes comes from analyzing the raw data (e.g., interview transcriptions, observational field notes), collapsing the raw data into a reasonable set of codes (say 20), aggregating the codes into a small number of themes (say five to seven), using the themes in a findings section as subtopics (or subheadings), and then possibly further grouping the themes into dimensions or figures. The elements that go into a good theme passage are a theme label that is conceptually interesting, multiple codes to provide evidence for the theme, specific quotations to further add information about the theme, and the views of different sources of information (participants, observations, and so forth).

Activity

Look at a theme passage in a published qualitative journal article. Underline the following elements: the codes, the participants, and the quotations. Reflect on whether the theme label is interesting and would encourage you to read about the theme.

Further Resources

Bazeley, P. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: Practical strategies*. London: Sage Ltd.

Kuckartz, U. (2014). *Qualitative text analysis: A guide to methods, practice and using software*. London: Sage Ltd.

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