

**Analysing Semi-Structured Interviews Using Thematic
Analysis: Exploring Voluntary Civic Participation
Among Adults**

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Abstract

This exemplar highlights some of the key points for consideration when conducting thematic analysis on semi-structured interview data. The data exemplar is provided by Dr Ceryn Evans, from the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD), Cardiff University, who was funded by the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to explore civic participation amongst adults in Wales. Thematic analysis was carried out with the aim of exploring the social construction of civic engagement in the context of examining relationships between higher education participation and civic engagement. The extract provided in the dataset is from an interview with a single male participant, aged in his early 50s and living in Wales. The exemplar will be particularly useful to those considering using thematic analysis as an analytic method on semi-structured interview data within a broad range of disciplines in the social sciences, including sociology and the sociology of education more specifically.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative semi-structured interviews are one of the most dominant and widely used methods of data collection within the social sciences (Bradford & Cullen, 2012). They are valuable because they allow researchers to explore subjective viewpoints (Flick, 2009) and to gather in-depth accounts of people's experiences. Typically, an interview schedule is used, which enables the researcher to address a defined topic whilst allowing the respondent to answer in their own terms and to discuss issues and topics pertinent to them (Choak, 2012). The schedule should therefore guide the interview, but also allow other relevant themes to develop throughout the interview (Choak, 2012). In this sense, the interview should resemble a 'flowing conversation' (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Choak, 2012). The popularity of semi-structured interviews within the social sciences partly reflects their independence from a single theoretical framework or epistemological position. Qualitative semi-structured interviews can be used as much to consider experience, meanings and the 'reality' of participants' experiences as they can be used to explore how these experiences, 'realities' and meanings might be informed by discourses, assumptions or ideas which exist in wider society (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Exemplar: Voluntary Civic Participation Among Adults

This exemplar intends to highlight some key points for consideration when conducting thematic analysis on semi-structured interview data. The data exemplar is provided by Dr Ceryn Evans from the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with adults to explore the extent to which the experience of higher education (HE) bears upon their engagement in civil society. This was part of a broader project, funded by the ESRC, which aimed to examine relationships between HE and civic engagement, meaning participation in clubs, associations and organisations outside of paid employment or the home. Interviews were conducted in 2015/2016 with 14 people, all in their early 50s and resident in Wales. These interviews addressed questions about the processes, contexts and circumstances that underpin civic engagement. The exemplar provided here is not intended to give a step-by-step guide to conducting thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data. Rather, it outlines three pertinent points for consideration when undertaking thematic analysis on qualitative interview data.

Analysis: (Considering) Thematic Analysis of Interviews

Below, Ceryn outlines three key points researchers might want to consider when conducting thematic analysis on semi-

structured interviews, using data extracts from her interviews to illustrate this.

Consideration 1: Is thematic analysis useful for me?

Thematic analysis is a hugely popular analytic method. Its popularity partly reflects its independence from any particular theoretical approach or epistemology persuasion (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this reason, it will be useful to researchers who position their work within either realist or constructionist paradigms within the social sciences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the context of exploring voluntary civic participation, thematic analysis is useful because it enables us to examine, from a constructionist methodological position, the meanings that people attach to their civic participation, the significance it has in their lives, and, more broadly, their social constructions of it. At the same time, it also enables us to examine how these constructions might reflect the 'reality' of participants' lived experiences, the material or social contexts in which they live and which constrain and enable their opportunities for civic participation. Thus, if you are interested in examining the ways that people make meaning out of their experiences, as well as how they construct their social worlds through meaning-making, but also want to retain a focus on the ways in which these experiences will be informed by their material experiences and contexts, you might wish to consider thematic analysis.

Consideration 2: What counts as a theme?

Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns and themes within the data. This begins at the stage of data collection and continues throughout the process of transcribing, reading and re-reading, analysing and interpreting the data. As you read and re-read your transcripts, you should remind yourself of your overarching research questions, as these questions will guide your thinking about the data and what you consider to be worthy of a theme. Braun and Clarke (2006), for example, maintain that a theme should capture something important about the data in relation to your research questions, and represents some level of patterned meaning or response within the dataset. Typically, a theme will appear more than once across the dataset but the frequency of instances of a theme or narrative within a dataset does not automatically indicate that it is more or less important than another, which has few instances across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is because in qualitative analysis the importance or significance of a theme is reflected in the extent to which it 'speaks to' your theoretical position or your overarching research questions.

To illustrate this, let us consider my research on voluntary civic participation amongst adults. I was interested in understanding why some people are more active than others in terms of their voluntary participation in associations, clubs or societies. Respondents who did little voluntary participation tended to allude to the way in which their heavy time constraints, stemming from their work and domestic commitments, inhibited their capacity for voluntary participation. This is illustrated in an extract from Miriam's interview (not shown in this dataset), who explained her lack of engagement in terms of her heavy work commitments.

I don't often, I very rarely leave [work] before half past six in an evening. So by the time you know you leave, you kind of pick up some shopping, so seven o'clock or whatever you get home. I make dinner, sort of I find that very relaxing, that's like my time (Miriam).

This emphasis on 'time constraints' in Miriam's comment was a pertinent narrative in the data; people who did little voluntary civic participation overwhelmingly 'explained away' their disengagement in terms of time constraints. To this end, 'time restrictions' was an important theme because it provided insight into why people do or do not participate, one of my overarching research questions. Even for those who did participate, a lack of free time was given as the reason for not engaging more in civil activities. This is illustrated in Ralf's comment in which he explains his disengagement by emphasising his commitments to his paid employment:

Right, well because I work particularly hard, so I probably wouldn't be getting home, before six most nights so there's little time in the evening for doing a great deal. So, it's only this time of year that I don't do a great deal at all in the evenings. Thursday nights I'm on the committee of Bromley¹ Film Society so that's probably my major

sort of social event of the week... (Ralf)

Time constraints therefore was a recurring explanation as to why people do not participate in civic endeavours or are restricted in the amount of time they can commit to their activities.

Some other themes, though, were not as frequent across my interviews, but they were, nonetheless, considered important because they captured something significant in relation to my overall research question. To illustrate this, consider Tony's explanation for his voluntary participation on the school governing board:

I'm Chair of the local primary school Board of Governors. Yeah, it is quite a commitment because you're always popping in and out of the school...meeting the Head, meeting Governors from the other school, so yeah, but it's just putting something back in. All my four children went through that primary school, kind of you know, giving something back I suppose. (Tony)

Tony's emphasis on 'giving back to society' to explain his voluntary participation was a narrative which only a small number of interviewees used to explain their civic engagement. Yet because it provided important leverage on understanding the 'social construction' of civic engagement it was considered important. However, I could only really gather the significance of this narrative through moving from the semantic to the latent level of thematic analysis. At the semantic level of analysis, themes are identified in the surface/explicit meaning of the data i.e. in what respondents said about their voluntary participation (or lack thereof). In Tony's case, the narrative of 'giving back' to society was used to describe his reasons for volunteering and civic participation. When we move to the latent (or interpretative) level of analysis, we begin to interrogate the assumptions, ideas and discourses that might underlie the spoken narrative. Latent analysis forms a significant element of data interpretation; it enables the researcher to move from merely describing the data to interpreting it through consideration of the broader assumptions or ideas that are at play in informing the explicit content (i.e. what respondents say). It thus addresses the ever-present question that any discerning researcher should ask of their data, which is, 'So what?' Or, in other words, 'What does my data actually mean?'

In relation to Tony's comment, latent analysis reveals an underlying assumption about volunteering and the associated discourses that currently exist in wider society, which underpinned the theme present at the semantic level of analysis. Here, civic participation cannot simply be regarded as personal or private practice but as framed by societal discourses in which civic engagement is a culturally valuable activity (encouraged by recent UK government agendas such as the Coalition Government's 'Big Society', in which volunteering, an aspect of civic participation, features large). Hence, this theme 'spoke to' my research questions because, through consideration of the wider discourses and assumptions at play, it provided insight into why people voluntarily participate in activities, societies or associations.

As a further example of the way in which latent analysis can help us search our data more deeply to understand underlying meanings and ideas let us, again, consider Ralf's comment about his involvement in his local Film Society.

Ceryn: I see, I see, yeah. Okay. I was going to ask to what extent does that, your social life overlap with your hobbies and interests and you know do you do these things, by yourself or is it with, kind of socially with friends?

Ralf: So we don't, I don't tend to spend, you know...I have a big social network here which I think is you know if I lived in Cardiff I'd have a big social network but living here it's not the same. It takes a long time to find similar minded people, you know so, well it's very hard to find people who have the sort of similar kind of...this is a Tory county and people here are probably very Tory oriented, whereas I'd probably describe myself as Liberal, left-wing, you know sort of intellectual oriented kind of view of the world and that isn't present here. So, the Film Society would be one of those very few small oasis where you're likely to come across people where you could have a kind of, a cultural or an intellectual discussion about, about the state of the world, you know. Whereas that doesn't... that's hard to find, that's hard to find that kind of environment in Woodshire.

In Ralf's words, voluntary participation in the Film Society is a valuable means through which his political and social orientations and values are endorsed through socialising with 'similar minded people'. Deeper searching of his comments reveals that his voluntary participation enables important 'identity work' to take place; it is means through which he is able to define himself as (socially, politically and intellectually) different from people living in his area, through socialising with those he views as more similar to himself at the Film Society. Indeed, Ralf's assertion of difference from the local populace is further reflected in his description of the kinds of films screened by the film society, i.e. non-mainstream films, or in his words, 'typical film society films' (see data extract). Ralf defines his identity not only in relation to his interaction with particular types of people at the film society but also through the types of films shown. Moving from the semantic to the latent level of analysis reveals how voluntary participation has particular meaning for Ralf, not only because it is a space in which he can interact with others he deems as similar types, but because it is also intimately bound with the formation and consolidation of his identity.

Thus, to return to the question 'What counts as a theme?', the answer to this is that it is made in relation to your theoretical consideration or research questions. When you begin to interrogate your data, and move from the semantic level of analysis to the latent level, this will enable you to move from merely describing your data (and describing what people are saying) to examining how this might reflect underlying assumptions, ideas or meanings which exist for individuals or in wider society. This is the process of theorising with your data, of making sense of it, and of getting a message across about what the data actually means. Let us now move on to consideration 3.

Consideration 3: How do I represent the themes I have identified in the data?

One of the biggest challenges you might face when working with qualitative interviews is how, exactly, to report or represent patterns or themes that you have identified within your data. You will need to think carefully about how you want to do this. Sometimes you will find it appropriate to use 'pseudo quantitative terms' to report your data, and, indeed, many qualitative researchers do. For example, Reay (2001, p. 39) writes 'many of the working-class students...' and Meehan et al. (2000, p. 372) report 'for the majority of participants' and Crozier et al. (2008, p. 264) assert 'most parents said...'. However, where you have a small number of data items within a dataset (i.e. a small number of interviews), these sorts of terms might not be appropriate and, moreover, they do not necessarily tell your readers much about the relevance of a particular theme in relation to your research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this case, it will be more useful to give your readers a sense of the theme without reference to quantitative terminology. Here, you should describe a theme in detail, providing a rich description of it, and then present an extract from an interview to exemplify it. For example, following presentation of a data extract, Reay & Ball (1997) write: 'These are examples of a paradoxical theme...' (p. 92). Other particularly good examples of this approach to representing qualitative interview data (from research within the sociology of education) can be found in Reay et al. (2009), Ball et al. (2002) and Vincent and Ball (2007).

Interpreting and representing your data is a 'craft' that presents challenges and requires careful and reflexive consideration. This is time worth spending; thorough attention brings rigour to your research, and the analysis and interpretation of your data will reflect your epistemological and theoretical position.

Overall

Having read this data exemplar you should now be able to approach the analysis of your semi-structured interview data mindful of three pertinent considerations. In particular, you should understand the analytic value of thematic analysis, specifically, its usefulness within both constructionist and as well as realist epistemological paradigms within the social sciences. You should also have a clearer understanding of what constitutes semantic and latent levels of analysis, and how to move from the former to the latter in order to ask searching questions about your data in relation to wider meanings and ideas. Lastly, you should now be aware of the different approaches to representing your data, and the ways in which this can be accomplished.

Reflective Questions

1. Using the data exemplar provided (an extract from an interview with Ralf), what might a semantic and a latent level of analysis tell us about Ralf's participation in the local film society?
2. How does Ralf explain his minimal voluntary commitments? What would a semantic and a latent level of analysis tell us?
3. Think about how you might represent a theme within this exemplar. What themes can you draw out of the data?

Note

1. Pseudonyms for people and places have been used throughout.

Further Reading

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