

# **THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH**

**Edited by** Jeroen Huisman  
and Malcolm Tight

THEORY AND METHOD IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

**VOLUME 8**

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HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

# THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
RESEARCH VOLUME 8

**THEORY AND METHOD IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION  
RESEARCH**

EDITED BY

**JEROEN HUISMAN**  
*Ghent University, Belgium*

And

**MALCOLM TIGHT**  
*Lancaster University, UK*



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# LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

<i>Barbara Crossouard</i>	University of Sussex, UK
<i>Davide Dusi</i>	Ghent University, Belgium
<i>Christina Haas</i>	Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories, Germany
<i>Ai Tam Le</i>	University of Melbourne, Australia
<i>Maria Pilar Lorenzo</i>	Ghent University, Belgium
<i>Paolo Oprandi</i>	University of Sussex, UK
<i>Amir Shahsavari</i>	Shahid Beheshti University, Iran
<i>Matthew Taylor</i>	University of Sydney, Australia
<i>Malcolm Tight</i>	Lancaster University, UK
<i>Simon Warren</i>	Roskilde University, Denmark
<i>Etienne Woo</i>	University of Cambridge, UK

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## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

This is the 2022 volume in the annual series *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research*, which we launched in 2013 in the belief that there was a need to provide a forum specifically for higher education researchers to discuss issues of theory and method.

The contributions in this volume lean more toward theory than method. Thus, we have Lorenzo considering regionalism, Warren examining transnational history, Woo discussing authoritarian policymaking, Le on academic work values, Shahsavari categorizing the functional missions of the university, and Crossouard and Oprandi exploring formative assessment in the context of decolonization.

More methodological contributions include those of Dusi on alternative approaches to thematic analysis, Tight on the underuse of observational methods, Haas considering the application of sequence analysis, and Taylor on the practice of online focus groups.

As in previous years, the volume displays an international authorship, with contributions from Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Iran, and the United Kingdom.

Anyone interested in contributing a chapter to a future volume is invited to get in touch with either, but preferably both, of the editors.

Jeroen Huisman  
Malcolm Tight

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# DOING RIGHT (BY) THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Davide Dusi

## ABSTRACT

*The use of thematic analysis (TA) as a qualitative analytical technique is gaining traction in higher education research. This is a positive development, since TA has a lot to offer in terms of enhancing scholars' analytical prowess. However, its usage in higher education as a field of study appears at times to be inaccurate. In other cases, methodological steps remain unclear, if not completely obscured, making it difficult for a reader to understand how this method should be conducted and/or how specific results/findings have been achieved. Also, researchers have widely embraced a variation of TA that emerged in the last decade and a half, neglecting the original, rigorous method put forward by Boyatzis in the late 1990s. This contribution takes a critical look at the current use of TA in higher education research. It highlights current issues in its application, presents and constructively criticizes the most employed approach to TA in higher education, and proposes greater consideration for TA's original specification and procedural guidelines.*

**Keywords:** Thematic analysis; qualitative research; higher education research; qualitative methods; reflexive thematic analysis; coding

## INTRODUCTION

Thematic analysis (TA) is anything but a new analytical technique when it comes to qualitative data analysis. Some of its principles and procedures are rooted in the old tradition of qualitative content analysis (Joffe & Yardley, 2004) and its appearance can be traced back to the scholarship of Gerald Holton (1975, 1978), who proposed it as a method for the historiography of science in the 1970s. TA immediately appealed to scholars in the sociology of science (e.g., Merton, 1975) for its ability to access implicit, tacit themes, and thematic structures in one's research data (Dusi & Stevens, forthcoming; Joffe, 2012). Afterward, however, its

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use remained sporadic and inconsistent for a couple of decades (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Although TA was certainly on the radar of qualitative methodologists and researchers in the 1980s (e.g., Leininger, 1985), scholars at that time mainly focused on pushing forward its usefulness and overall description as a method rather than outlining it as a systematic procedure. From the 1990s onward, the use of TA as a pragmatic process started to gain momentum (Aaronson, 1995).

What one may consider to be the first, clear, rigorous specification of TA and elaboration of its procedural guidelines appeared at the end of the 1990s due to the work of organizational theorist and social psychologist Richard Boyatzis (1998). The employment of TA then started to increase consistently, gaining an extra boost of popularity in the 2000s, however, due to the scholarship of Braun and Clarke (2006). They developed their own approach to TA by focusing on its applicability in psychology research. It is interesting to notice that both approaches have been developed by scholars belonging to (mainly) quantitative disciplinary backgrounds.

Over time, both Boyatzis' (1998) rigorous method and Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) slightly more flexible approach to TA have become increasingly popular in several domains and research fields. Meanwhile, diverse approaches to TA have also emerged (e.g., Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Howitt, 2010; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). While some focus more on the theoretical and epistemological implications of choosing TA as an analytical technique (Joffe, 2012), others provide pragmatic guidelines for its use (see Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

Not surprisingly, TA is widely used in psychology and mental health research (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Joffe, 2012; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017), as well as in nursing and health research (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). It is also increasingly being used in media studies (Herzog, Handke, & Hitters, 2019), sociology, and anthropology (Guest et al., 2012; Merton, 1975), to name a few. Studies that employ TA as a main analytical technique or in combination with other qualitative and quantitative methods have also been multiplying in higher education research (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This is in principle a positive development, insofar as an undoubtedly valuable technique is taking up increasing space in higher education researchers' analytical toolkit. After a thorough analysis, however, one might claim its usage remains inconsistent and at times superficial, if not inaccurate. Looking at relevant scholarship employing TA in higher education research, one might wonder how to actually go about using this technique.

This contribution aims to bring clarity to its usage and procedural guidelines, both in terms of practical steps and how to report on its analytical process and results. A brief, general overview is provided of what TA is, including its scope and strengths, along with an evaluation of its usage in higher education as a field of study. Braun and Clarke's approach – widely popular in higher education research – is then introduced, and some of its potential limitations underlined. Boyatzis' original formulation of TA and procedural guidelines are subsequently presented as a valuable alternative to Braun and Clarke's. Greater consideration for Boyatzis' approach is proposed.

## MAIN FEATURES AND STRENGTHS OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is a systematic and transparent form of qualitative analysis. It is helpful to researchers not only to analyze data but also to develop core qualitative skills (Nowell et al., 2017). It is particularly suitable for the analysis of qualitative data obtained through individual interviews, group interviews or focus groups, as well as through the collection/production of written material (e.g., policy documents, mission statements), images, and video material (Joffe, 2012). TA allows researchers to identify patterns of meaning (referred to as themes) within a given set of data. Through the identification or development of themes, a researcher can first systematically organize perceptions of and/or perspectives on specific phenomena/practices detected in the data, for then employ the identified/developed themes to describe and interpret them (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2021). One may identify themes either directly in the data – at the manifest level – or as interpretations of the data – the latent level (Boyatzis, 1998; Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007). TA relies upon both types of themes. Indeed, a set of identified manifest themes (explicit content) may be used or help to access a latent level (implicit content) of meaning (Joffe & Yardley, 2004; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

Although focused on themes across a dataset, TA does not sacrifice depth of analysis. The scope of a TA is not confined to identifying themes or developing them starting from a discrete dataset, but should also enable the identification of relationships among themes – if necessary by developing a network of interconnected themes across a dataset (Attride-Stirling, 2001) – and the interpretation of the relevance and implications of those relationships for the research question one wants to answer. TA is therefore highly appropriate and particularly useful for investigating how a phenomenon is understood, experienced, or presented.

However, a researcher who employs TA does so not only to report on how a phenomenon is characterized by respondents or, more generally, what that phenomenon is (thought) to be about, but also to further investigate and develop a deeper understanding of sense-making processes (Dusi & Stevens, forthcoming). By also taking into account the relevance of context for the description of phenomena, TA provides the opportunity to go beyond basic accounts of (social) reality (how reality is presented), and therefore to achieve a better understanding or explanation of why things are the way they are. Through the employment of a TA, a researcher can either chose to focus on generating, identifying, and/or describing (relationships among) themes or, starting from those very themes, to generate higher-level constructs (e.g., meta-themes) that contribute to theory in a more abstract and/or formal way.

More generally, TA provides a systematic framework for analyzing qualitative data. It allows us to approach data from different perspectives and to employ those very perspectives during the coding and theme development phases of the analysis. A researcher can choose among four different approaches for code and theme-development: theory-driven, research-driven, data-driven, or a

combination (hybrid) of deductive and inductive approaches (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Guest et al., 2012). Through the theory-driven approach, code is developed in a deductive way and it is based on, and derived from, the theoretical framework a researcher chooses to employ. The research-driven approach is also deductive and the developed code is based on, or derived from, previous empirical research. The data-driven approach allows one to develop code and themes inductively – this type of code development might be guided by one’s research question in a more or less strict fashion.

The hybrid approach consists of the combination of inductive and deductive code/theme development techniques. The researcher develops code and themes considering not only what might emerge from the raw data but simultaneously keeping in mind theory and previous empirical research regarding their topic of interest. The hybrid approach is increasingly employed by a growing number of scholars to overcome the limitations of inductive and deductive approaches (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Such a deductive/inductive approach has recently started to increasingly characterize high-quality qualitative work in different disciplines (Joffe, 2012).

Being a method and not a methodology, TA is not bound to a specific theoretical or epistemological approach – nor to a predefined research methodology (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Joffe, 2012), and can therefore be applied in different instances (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014, 2021). Another advantage of TA is that it enables a scholar to make robust and sophisticated analyses accessible to nonexpert audiences (Ayres, 2008; Braun & Clarke, 2014; Joffe & Yardley, 2004), particularly through the employment of visual (re)presentations (Braun & Wilkinson, 2003). Although TA is highly appropriate when data require some degree of interpretation, it does not suffice when one aims to formulate a thorough explanation of a phenomenon or to make theoretical predictions (Newman, 2006).

TA as an analytical technique has become very popular and widely used in higher education research. But which approaches to TA do higher education researchers favor? And, more importantly, how is TA employed in higher education as a field of research? How is its analytical process accounted for and the reliability of its results supported?

## **THEMATIC ANALYSIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY**

A systematic literature review of research articles has been conducted to gain an overview of how scholars employ TA in the research field of higher education, and of how they describe the analytical process and its results. Research articles were initially selected based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- Mainly peer-reviewed articles published in higher education journals were selected. Articles published by higher education scholars on interdisciplinary journals were also considered.

- All selected articles were either listed and directly accessible through Web of Science or through databases such as Scopus, Springer, Emerald, and JSTOR.
- The selection of articles was limited to the period 1998–2021. This period was selected because Boyatzis' book *Transforming Qualitative Information. Thematic Analysis and Code Development* might be considered the first, clear specification of TA and deemed as a paramount elaboration of rigorous and articulated procedural guidelines (Dusi & Stevens, forthcoming).
- All articles were written in English.
- Articles were accessed using keywords such as “thematic analysis,” “themes,” “theme(s)-development,” “identified themes,” in combination with “higher education.”
- Preferably, the wording “thematic analysis” needed to be present either in the title, abstract, or keywords of the articles.
- The relevance of the articles in terms of citations and overall usage by other scholars in higher education research was also considered with regard to the reliability/credibility assigned to them.

A total of 103 articles were initially identified following the selection criteria. Abstract, method, and analysis sections were skimmed. Afterward, 11 articles were deemed to be of low relevance – although the wording “thematic analysis” appeared in the text, there was nothing about TA within the methodology or analysis section. Eventually, the 92 remaining articles were reviewed by focusing on method, analysis, results, and discussion sections.

The review of the articles showed how higher education scholars employ TA to investigate diverse and heterogeneous topics and practices; from students' conceptualizations as partners in educational and research practices (Matthews, Dwyer, Hine, & Turner, 2018), university career policy implementation (Dusi & Huisman, 2021), challenges influencing e-learning tools usage (Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh, & Althunibat, 2020), and the impact of volunteering activities on students' learning, employability, and satisfaction (Barton, Bates, & O'Donovan, 2019), to academic success (Cachia, Lynam, & Stock, 2018) and the learning and teaching experiences of students from minority backgrounds (Bunce, King, Saran, & Talib, 2021). Although many of the approaches to and interpretations of TA that have appeared over time are employed by higher education scholars, the vast majority of the reviewed articles were based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) take on TA. Only a couple of studies employed Boyatzis' original specification and guidelines.

The core of TA is theme identification/development. The process that leads to themes, as well as accounting for this process, is of paramount importance both when conducting and reporting on a TA and its results. One can find within the analyzed literature very good examples of how to conduct a TA and how to develop or identify themes, describe the process that led to their development/identification, report about them, and support the reliability of the results. For instance, Kolomitro, Kenny, and Sheffield (2020), in their exploration of the concepts of burnout and workplace well-being among educational developers,

employed TA to analyze survey data obtained through open-ended questions, providing the reader with clear examples of the different phases of theme-development and refinement. [Howell, Roberts, Seaman, and Gibson \(2018\)](#), while examining higher education academics' knowledge, attitudes, and concerns about the use of learning analytics, employed a form of "member checking" to establish the credibility of the findings, letting the research participants double-check their results.

[Van der Velden \(2021\)](#), in her exploration of informatics students' reflections on working with pen and paper and particularly on learning, knowing, and being, provides a very articulated description of the different coding phases undertaken, along with examples of the coding process, a visual overview of identified themes, and a clear description of each theme and examples of the occurrence of the themes in the data set. Lastly, [Cooley, Holland, Cumming, Novakovic, and Burns \(2014\)](#), in their investigation of students' perceptions of outdoor adventure education courses designed to foster the development of transferable skills, propose a clear (visual) representation of first-, second-, and third-level themes; then provide additional online information regarding the full set of themes and definitions, a full thematic map, and examples of quotes.

Unfortunately, these examples do not represent the norm when it comes to the utilization of TA in higher education research. The analysis of the selected articles revealed a major deficit in attention toward the following elements: the proper steps of a TA, the theme-development process description, the reliability/credibility of its results, and the overall quality of the analysis.

Since the scope of this contribution is not that of naming names regarding either poor examples of how to conduct, and report upon, a TA, the identified issues regarding its application have been grouped into eight main concerns a reader might have regarding how to address a TA and its results. As the examples already presented outline the "dos" when it comes to the proper conduct and reporting of TA, the list below may be seen as the "don'ts." Importantly, 38 of the 92 analyzed articles exhibit one or more of the following issues:

- *The general steps of a TA are listed in the method/analysis section (e.g., through a description of how you should do it according to a specific author) but there is no account of how those steps were undertaken, how procedures were carried out, or why TA was chosen.* This is problematic as no justification for the usage of TA is provided. The reader does not know if the analytical technique actually matches the research goals. All the allegedly rigorous steps undertaken that should characterize a TA remain obscured; making one wonder if and how they were ever actually taken. This strongly undermines the credibility of the analysis in the eyes of a reader or external evaluator. Authors might, therefore, want to keep track of the development of their analysis and, while documenting all the undertaken steps, store evidence (e.g., screenshots, queries' results, notes) of all the different phases of the analysis, as well as of the reason(s) to take specific steps, and of the outcomes of those very steps.

- *The employed procedures/techniques do not match (or only partially) the approach the authors cite or claim to rely on.* TA is varied in its approaches to data (e.g., deductive, inductive, hybrid), but each of these approaches is systematic in its application. Although one may favor one or the other approach for different reasons – pragmatic, epistemological, etc. – each existing approach is supposedly based on a specific rationale and the envisaged steps are developed to achieve a specific goal (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Only partially following or not following what one claims as a foundation for the analytical process undermines the robustness of the overall analysis.
- *A TA is conducted but no relevant literature on TA is cited, nor is the adopted approach presented.* The reader must guess or put the pieces of the puzzle together themselves. First, not all the existing approaches to TA are the same and/or propose the same steps for data analysis. Second, not only do the steps/phases of a TA need to be accounted for but the researcher(s) also need(s) to explain where they come from – what makes them reliable or worthy to be employed (e.g., they belong to an established approach or are based on a widely renowned study). Alternatively, if one has developed one's own approach to TA, this needs to be made clear for the reader. The way the approach was developed and/or what its epistemological basis is needs to be specified.
- *The analysis is presented as a TA but ends up resembling, or even becoming, either a qualitative content analysis or a partial grounded theory approach.* This conveys confusion regarding authors' understanding of what a TA is and/or what steps, procedures and goals differentiate it from a qualitative content analysis or grounded theory. It may also bring further confusion to those who need to evaluate a study and its results. Although some steps of TA may overlap with or be the basis of steps of other techniques, these should not be mixed up. TA, qualitative content analysis, and grounded theory serve different scopes and provide researchers with the possibility to achieve quite different levels of abstraction (Charmaz, 2014; Mayring, 2004). While qualitative content analysis allows the scholar at best to achieve more descriptive goals, such as identifying associations among concepts in the data, and while TA goes a bit further by allowing one to put forward claims regarding the relationships among those concepts and the meaning of the identified relationships for the research question, grounded theory allows the scholar to achieve much more – namely to make theoretical predictions, generate and test hypotheses, and build middle-range theory (Newman, 2006).
- *No clear overview of the identified/developed themes is provided.* The reader does not get to know what the overall themes are, and just discovers some of them in the analysis/discussion section. Overviews of identified themes are important: they should present a meaningful and insightful picture of the data one has analyzed and the results to which that analysis led (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Just by looking at the themes' overview, a reader should be able to gain an initial understanding of what the developed themes are about, how they relate to each other and to what extent they are relevant to a specific research question.

Without such an overview it becomes difficult to understand why specific themes in the text are addressed later on, and, above all, why the authors/researchers focus on those themes. Although it is true that themes should be developed in a way that allows them to stand alone, they should also form a coherent whole with the other themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

- *If an overview of themes is presented, no account of where the identified/developed themes come from is provided* (e.g., examples of sub-themes or of the overall development/refinement process). The lack of an overview undermines the perceived quality and reliability of the presented analysis, as a reader might wonder whether the proposed themes were the actual result of an adequate thematic structure or of selective and/or inadequate coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In those cases in which the presented themes appear as an attempt to already answer the research question – themes should not be developed with that goal in mind – the analysis might be perceived as either biased or superficial.
- *When combined with quantitative methods as part of a mixed-methods approach, it is mentioned in passing that a TA has also been conducted but no actual or even partial account of the process is presented.* If TA is combined with another analytical technique because of the benefits it offers, the reason/s to do so need to be specified and the undertaken steps need to be provided along with an account of their level of reliability and results. That TA may not be the main analytical technique within a specific analytical process does not justify a lack of reporting about it.
- *Topics are confused with themes*; while they are actually two distinct things. Consequently, researchers neither identify nor develop themes but produce topic summaries. Braun and Clarke (2021, pp. 76–77) make a clear distinction between topic summaries and themes. A topic summary is a range of possible meanings or values attached to a topic and mainly refers to “everything the participants said about a particular topic.” A theme, instead, represents a concept that structures a particular, shared understanding and specifically refers to “a pattern of shared meaning organized around a central concept.” The difference between a topic and a theme needs to be kept in mind by the researcher from the very first steps of the analysis if they want to avoid compromising the overall analytical endeavor and the quality of their final results.

Overall, in several cases, methodological steps remain unclear, if not unaccounted for, making specific research findings appear as questionable, thereby undermining the understanding of TA as a sound methodology.

Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2021) widely employed approach and Boyatzis’ (1998) original specification will now be addressed to clarify procedural guidelines and specific points of attention for those interested in conducting a TA. Greater consideration for the latter will be proposed.