

Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) ¹

Descriptive Presentation of Qualitative Data

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Introduction.

Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data. Qualitative data may take the form of interview transcripts collected from research participants or other identified texts that reflect experientially on the topic of study. While video, image, and other forms of data may accompany textual data, this description of TCA is limited to textual data. A number of software programs are available to automate the labeling and grouping of texts and are especially useful in the analysis of numerous transcripts. Generally speaking, though, Microsoft Word can be used effectively for most TCAs and the steps are described below.

A satisfactory TCA portrays the thematic content of interview transcripts (or other texts) by identifying common themes in the texts provided for analysis. TCA is the most foundational of qualitative analytic procedures and in some way informs all qualitative methods. In conducting a TCA, the researcher's epistemological stance is objective or objectivistic. In teaching Qualitative Research Methods, I describe TCA as a form of "low hovering" over the data. The researcher groups and distills from the texts a list of common themes in order to give expression to the communality of voices across participants. Every attempt reasonable is made to employ names for themes from the actual words of participants and to group themes in manner that directly reflects the texts as a whole. While sorting and naming themes requires some level of interpretation, "interpretation" is kept to a minimum. The researcher's own feelings and thoughts about the themes or what the TCA themes may signify are largely irrelevant to a TCA.

¹ This document was originally prepared in 1997 for graduate students needing a succinct, clear presentation of TCA and revised in 2007 for general distribution. The author wishes to acknowledge Ryan Rominger and Jenny Wade for their suggestions on an earlier draft.

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That is, the researcher forestalls interpretation of the meaning of the identified themes until later in the research report, typically in the Discussion.

However, TCA does not suffice as a complete analysis of research findings because it is merely descriptive. I occasionally hear qualitative researcher quip informally that TCA is not an analysis at all. In Phenomenological Research, an elaborate and articulate set of procedures require researchers to situate identified meaning units in relationship to context and structure for each participant and then for the participants as a whole. Analogous procedures are found in Case Study, Discourse Analysis, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Heuristic Research, Intuitive Inquiry, Narrative Methods and variant derivative methods. Case Study, Discourse Analysis, Ethnography, Grounded Theory, Narrative Methods, and Phenomenological Research vary considerably in epistemological stance depending on the researcher and variant of the method used. (See Creswell (1998) and Fischer (2006) for overviews, case examples, and references for qualitative methods.) On the other hand, both Heuristic Research (Moustakas, 1990) and Intuitive Inquiry (Anderson, 1998, 2004) are constructivist in epistemological stance, incorporating objective and subjective data in order to provide inter-subjective interpretations that rely on the researcher's intuitive understanding the findings. In Intuitive Inquiry, when TCA is used to present a description of findings in Cycle 3, the inter-subjective meaning of TCA themes is presented as interpretive lenses in Cycle 4 of the Discussion.

Thematic Content Analysis

1. Before beginning a Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), make multiple copies of interview transcript (or other extant text, including post-interview notes) as relevant and stipulated in your Methods chapter.
2. Mark with a Highlighter (real or electronic) all descriptions that are relevant to the topic of inquiry. Criteria for "relevant" descriptions should be included in your Methods chapter.
3. From the highlighted areas, mark each distinct unit of meaning. Meaning units are separated by a break or change in meaning. Err on the side of too many units. However, be sure to retain all information relevant to understanding a meaning unit within the meaning unit. Otherwise, relevant information will be disconnected from source as the TCA continues. Units may vary in text length.
4. Cut out units and put similar units together in a pile. (On a Word file, copy and paste on to another document.) Code each unit, for example. 1-16 for interview # 1, page 16 (or by text line number).

5. Label each pile as initial categories (themes) using key words or phrases copied from highlighted texts. Use your own categories sparingly. Revise categories as you continue to code data.
6. If obvious information is missing from text, identify categories that are missing, for example, “no affect.”
7. Go through the entire interview transcript identifying distinct units, grouping and regrouping similar and dissimilar units, and re-labeling categories as you go along. Use your own categories/themes sparingly, retaining words copied from the meaning units being described.
8. Read through all meaning units per category and redistribute units as appropriate. Re-label categories as appropriate. Collapse or subdivide categories as appropriate.
9. After a few days, reread the original interview transcript or text without looking at your units or categories.
10. Return to meaning units and categories made on the first pass, and reconsider each unit and category. Redistribute units as appropriate, considering carefully whether your units are too small or too large. Re-label as appropriate. Collapse or subdivide categories as appropriate considering carefully whether your categories are too small or too large.
11. Look over your categories as a whole. Consider whether you have too many categories (or less likely, too few) to render meaning to your highlighted texts given your topic. If so, return to # 10.
12. For each additional interview transcript (or other texts), use the Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) as above.
13. When all TCAs are complete, read each TCA separately. Then, while retaining meaning units, combine categories/themes for all interview transcripts and notes. Collapse or subdivide categories as appropriate. Re-label categories as appropriate. Err on the side of having too many categories. Err on the side of retaining labels for categories that are identical or similar to the words in the interview transcripts.
14. After a few days, reread your total categories as a whole. Consider whether you have too many (or too few) categories to make overall sense of the interview transcripts given your topic.
15. Redo all the instructions above until you are satisfied that the categories reflect the interview transcripts as a whole. Once you are satisfied, your categories are themes and you are done with the TCA for this study.

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