

PDF - ANALYSING SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS USING THEMATIC ANALYSIS: EXPLORING VOLUNTARY CIVIC PARTICIPATION AMONG ADULTS - [researchcub.info](http://researchcub.info)

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 meaningmaking, 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 among 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 civic 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 Bromley 1 Film Society so that's probably my major SAGE Research Methods Datasets SAGE ©2018 SAGE Publications, Ltd.. All Rights Reserved. Analysing Semi-Structured Interviews Using Thematic Analysis: Exploring Voluntary Civic Participation Among Adults Page 3 of 6 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.

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