

Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2012).
Applied Thematic Analysis. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 365 pages.
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Reviewed by Michele Tarsilla

How many times did you have to sit through a presentation on research methods in which qualitative data were described as merely personal narratives of questionable credibility? And how many more times did you have to read evaluation reports that either featured no detailed description of the qualitative data analysis being used or simply showcased respondents' personal quotes as purely ancillary evidence to survey findings? If you are an evaluation student or an evaluation practitioner and you answered yes to any of the questions above, I am confident that you will thoroughly enjoy reading *Applied Thematic Analysis*, an innovative book on qualitative data analysis (not data collection) that promises to greatly enhance your current and future evaluation practice in numerous ways.

Aimed at revitalizing the current qualitative data analysis discourse, *Applied Thematic Analysis* will allow readers to question some of their prior knowledge of qualitative data analysis and will also expose them to a new analytical approach that Guest, MacQueen, and Namey define as "rigorous, inductive, pragmatic and straightforward." Furthermore, the book's 365 pages, filled as they are with interesting "real world" insights (Bamberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2012) derived from the authors' extensive teaching and research experience in domestic and international health, will allow readers to learn a plethora of strategies that will boost the quality of their data analysis and therefore the credibility of their findings, especially within the scope of mixed methods evaluation (Mertens & Tarsilla, 2013).

Overall, students taking evaluation and research methodology classes as well as evaluation professionals and researchers working on qualitative or mixed method evaluation will find this book particularly appealing for three main reasons.

First, far from providing a trite description of the qualitative data analysis step-by-step process covered in previously published literature, this book equips the readers with a solid and rather innovative methodological framework. In this vein, applied thematic analysis (ATA) is not presented as the corollary of any specific epistemological doctrine, but it is rather described as an approach that combines a diverse range of epistemological, theoretical, and disciplinary perspectives in response to concrete research needs.

Second, based on their extensive data analysis practice in a variety of qualitative and mixed methods research endeavours (primarily in the health sectors in nonprofit as well as corporate contexts in both the United States and overseas),

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the authors provide readers with a vast array of examples of when and how ATA should or should not be viewed as the most suitable methodological option.

Third, firmly grounded in adult learning principles (the authors have been training a cadre of research professionals for over a decade), the book provides readers with a series of ready-to-use data analysis tools and online resources found at the end of each chapter.

Moreover, the book structure itself promises to boost the readers' learning of the overall ATA process. In the first part of the book (Chapters 1–3), the foundations of applied thematic analysis are presented, accompanied by a myriad of relevant practical examples. Advocating for the use of different epistemological traditions and techniques borrowed from a plurality of disciplines beyond the nonsensical dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research methods, the three authors clearly explain in these first few pages how ATA relates to other qualitative epistemological frameworks (e.g., phenomenology, interpretivism, positivism, and grounded theory). By doing so, the authors get readers used to the idea that ATA strives toward the quantification of qualitative data (way beyond the traditional theory-building purposes) as well as the use of data to inform decision-making (Patton, 2008). After learning about the ATA framework in Chapter 1, readers are given the opportunity to familiarize themselves with two critical preliminary steps: the planning and preparation of qualitative data analysis, including the establishment of analytic objectives and the definition of the analysis boundaries, in Chapter 2; and the coding phase (e.g., the importance of distinguishing different types of data and developing codebooks accordingly) in Chapter 3.

The second part of the book (Chapters 4–6) provides an overview of topics that have often been neglected in specialized literature in the past. That is the case of the themes of reliability and validity (renamed *credibility* and *dependability* by the authors) in qualitative data analysis, discussed in Chapter 4. Similarly, alternative data analysis strategies (e.g., word search associated by-word-in-context search, gap analysis, deviance analysis, response interdependence, and the examination of nonverbal cues) are discussed in Chapter 5. Next, qualitative data quantification techniques (e.g., similarity matrices and cluster analysis) are explained in detail in Chapter 6.

The third part of the book (Chapters 7–10) allows readers to refine their data analysis techniques by exposing them to a variety of cutting-edge topics. These include the introduction of comparative analysis techniques in Chapter 7, the review of data integration in mixed methods research (one of the most powerful chapters I have ever read to date) in Chapter 8, and a comparison of the most popular data analysis software packages conducted according to a variety of criteria, including research needs (e.g., data management, data tagging, data exploration, and reduction) and a host of other critical considerations (e.g., price, logistics, data type, and coding strategy) in Chapter 9. The concluding chapter (Chapter 10) provides the readers with some up-to-date guidance on the write-up and dissemination of applied thematic analysis with a special focus on the type of audience (corporate

lay audiences, academic/scientific audiences, and funders) to which the analysis is addressed.

In conclusion, due to the relevance of the topic, the right balance between theory and practice, the numerous real case examples provided by the authors, and the concise language featured throughout the book, I greatly enjoyed reading *Applied Thematic Analysis* and strongly recommend it to all those students and practitioners interested in mastering a cutting-edge qualitative data analysis approach. Overall, this book not only represents a much needed addition to the existing evaluation literature but, by promoting more rigorous data analysis in both qualitative and mixed methods evaluations, it also make a unique contribution to the evaluation community at large.

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