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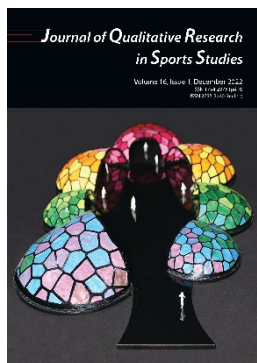
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Reflecting on reflections of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA): exemplar experiences and recommendations for new researchers in sport and coaching

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Keywords: *qualitative, data analysis, research philosophy, interpretive, Big Q*

Abstract

There is a growing body of research in sport and sports coaching in particular, being conducted with qualitative methods. Critics have however, identified a philosophical misalignment of methods being used. Many of these studies employ Thematic Analysis (TA) to probe and analyse their data without a clear appreciation of how the different stages of the process associate to the three different TA options: i. Codebook, ii. Reliability Coding, or iii. Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Thus, the purpose of our article is to provide neophyte sports coaching researchers with an in depth understanding of one TA method; Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) and guidance on how to conduct an RTA study that is coherent with the philosophy that underpins it. In doing so, an exemplar of a sports coaching RTA study is provided by the lead author (PhD student) with reflections to illustrate the challenges and learning development that engaging in the RTA study provided. These are supplemented by further reflections on the process by the second author (his PhD supervisor) to further explore related issues to aid the learning process. Consequently, this paper offers an original 'double hermeneutic' insight into RTA that in turn provides knowledge and guidance for those considering this method. Recommendations are made to maximise the quality of future studies in sport and coaching and avoid any potential criticism of philosophical misalignment.

Introduction

There are many challenges facing the new sport and coaching researcher. These begin with clearly stating the research question, and ultimately end with discussing key findings of their study. In between these start and finish points, researchers are faced with many choices of practical research methods across areas such as research philosophy, participant recruitment, data collection and analysis. Our work sets out to interrogate an often overlooked and somewhat assumed aspect of the research process, data analysis, specifically when undertaking research using an interpretive philosophy. We argue, that for those new to the research process, the early stages of

the process can be enhanced through a confident approach to collecting data i.e. research procedural knowledge, for instance, how to recruit participants or how to conduct a successful focus group. The latter stages however, especially data analysis, requires an increased level of declarative knowledge e.g. why am I analysing data in this way? Why is this the most appropriate method of analysis?

We acknowledge that there has been an advance in the use of qualitative methods to undertake primary data collection in sport and coaching (e.g. Griffo *et al.*, 2019; Nichol *et al.*, 2019) however one issue that has become evident, and with specific reference to the aims of this paper, is a lack of philosophical alignment. Specifically, the misappropriation of data analysis techniques in interpretive research design. This is especially so when evaluating such studies' quality (Evans *et al.*, 2021; McGannon *et al.*, 2021). Put simply, many researchers appear to be using methods of data analysis which are at odds with their stated research philosophy. With data collection such as Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI) and Focus Groups (FG) being prevalent within the sport and coaching literature, the ways in which researchers wade through and make sense of great volumes of data remains an increasingly complex problem. Consequently, the ways in which sport and coaching researchers analyse their data and maintain philosophical alignment to an increasingly interpretive philosophical position, is an area worthy of deeper exploration.

Our work explores the use of RTA as a method of data analysis. Specifically, RTA is offered as a method of data analysis which is philosophically aligned to those undertaking truly interpretive work. Therefore, our paper has three aims. Firstly, to provide an augmented description of RTA utilising a worked example of the RTA stages taken from the first author's PhD thesis. Secondly, to offer retrospective thoughts (of both authors) on the process ensuring that the self-questioning, internal dialogue and reflections that took place during the process are explicit. This is so that the reader can actually see and hear reflexivity happening (and hence increase their own declarative knowledge). Finally, we present recommendations on how RTA can be better tailored to the needs of those just engaging with this process for the first time, to positively influence the overall alignment of future interpretive research in sport and coaching.

What is RTA?

Thematic Analysis (TA) is often mis-conceptualized as a single qualitative analytic approach. In fact, three main approaches to TA have been recognised. Each of these approaches has a significantly different method i.e. how the analysis actually happens. The different methods stem from a significantly different philosophical underpinning (Clarke, 2017). Whilst RTA is the focus of this work, it is worth briefly outlining the two other approaches; i. Coding Reliability; ii. Codebook. These forms

of TA often involve researchers having a pre-set list of themes/ideas of which they are looking for in the data. That is, prior to starting the analysis, these themes/ideas have been given clear definitions. Specifically in Codebook analysis, researcher agreement is often sought, known as ‘consensus coding’. Here, analysis of the data is seen as ‘correct’ providing that two (or more) separate researchers have assigned the same code. In referring to a researchers’ philosophical positioning outlined earlier, these two approaches to TA have come under scrutiny. Whilst these forms of TA are often used in qualitative research, they are criticised for having increasingly positivistic underpinnings. As such, these approaches are commonly referred to as *small q* approaches (Kidder and Fine, 1987). For example, these types of approaches highlight the importance of ‘reliability and replicability’ (Braun *et al.*, 2019:847) which are more associated with increasingly positivist, black and white approaches to the research process.

In contrast, RTA is positioned as a *Big Q* approach (Kidder and Fine, 1987) given that it acknowledges that meaning is contextual and situated. This is also the case as RTA benefits from the unique role of the individual researcher within the analysis process. The role of the researcher is viewed positively given the unique experiences, insight and contextual understanding that is integral to the process (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Data analysis then becomes a creative as opposed to strictly technical (i.e. black and white) process. *Big Q* approaches are likened to a sculptor chipping away at a block of marble. The quality of the resulting sculpture is a result of the interaction between the sculptor, their skills and the raw materials (Terry *et al.*, 2017). Finally, there is no doubt that themes formed as part of the analysis do not *emerge* from the data like mythical creatures. They are *constructed* by the researcher.

Importantly, this positioning clearly reflects the underpinnings of an interpretive research philosophy and ultimately leads to RTA as a useful tool in exploring what participants think, feel and do (Braun *et al.*, 2019). This is almost at odds with the other forms of TA where the bias the researcher brings to his research context can be viewed as a limitation of the work (Braun *et al.*, 2019).

From a practical perspective RTA follows a six-stage process identified by Braun and Clarke (2013). Familiarisation (step 1) of the data occurs through reading and re-reading of transcripts, whereby initial codes are then generated (step 2). Once initial coding is completed, themes are created (step 3) and reviewed (step 4) to ensure data was reflective of the themes. Finally, themes are defined (step 5). Reflecting the idea that good themes are those that tell a coherent, insightful story about the data in relation to the research question (Braun *et al.*, 2019) the final step (i.e. step 6) is the creation and writing up of ‘storybook themes’ (Clarke, 2017). The following section reflects on this six-stage process in detail.

Outlining our approach to conducting this research

Research design

The research used a reflexive personal narrative approach in the form of reflective episodes from both authors. This approach was appropriate given how narrative accounts can embrace the uniqueness and complexity of individuals, in this case the authors' lived experience (Carless and Douglas, 2017). Due to the aims of our work, using an approach which helps to shed light on the meaning of personal experience was vital to the integrity of our research in its process and product (Carless and Douglas, 2017).

Participants: researcher reflexivity statements

The following section introduces two key participants; Matt and David. In keeping with the style of our work, this is achieved via researcher reflexivity statements. Reflexivity is about self-examination as researcher. In doing so, we outline who we are as individuals and multifaceted professionals in an attempt to showcase how our personal biases may influence the research process (Berger, 2015). Clearly, knowing more about us will enrich engagement with our work.

Matt - lead researcher, PhD student, university lecturer and qualified cricket coach.

In exploring my positionality, I have many formal roles. Importantly, these roles enable me to bring a host of experience, skills and knowledge to the research process. I was going to attempt to identify my primary role however this is difficult. For instance, whilst it might be argued the clear role I have is as a PhD student, my drive and ambition for undertaking PhD research was to continue to contribute to my own development as a cricket coach. Not only that, but my role as a PhD student supplements my position as a university lecturer.

I have for many years invested in my own development as a cricket coach, studying undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in sports coaching alongside completing my national governing body qualifications to the highest level achievable in the sport. As a qualified cricket coach, I have had a range of hands-on coaching experiences across a multitude of contexts (e.g. performance level, age, stage of development etc.) Perhaps most interestingly, I was successful in gaining my first role in academia because of my coaching background. My unashamed bias then is about coaching practice. I am a cricket coach. I want to know players and help them get better. I know that in order to do this to the best of my ability, I have to engage in new learning myself.

In addressing one of these new areas, becoming a new PhD researcher, I have previously engaged in undertaking primary research [dissertations] through my own academic education. These projects were interpretive, although at the time I simply referred to them as qualitative. Perhaps unsurprisingly I collected data using a range of SSI and FGs. Perhaps even more unsurprisingly, I analysed data using TA. In engaging with further research projects and PhD level study, it was clear I had to know more. It was also clear that the TA that I did, wasn't really TA.

In closing and referring to my philosophical positioning, I generally hold an increasingly relative ontological positioning. Experiences are key and it is the interpretation of those experiences which ultimately leads to a personal truth (Brownlee, 2004; Guba, 1990). There is no one truth. There is no true or false. As Blaikie (2007) suggests, the only knowledge of reality lies with the social actors who experience it. It is perhaps then no surprise that I am increasingly drawn to interpretive approaches to research. As such, delving deeper into the analysis of data was an important step.

David – Researcher, PhD Director of Studies, Professor, Coach of multiple sports.

As with Matt's reflexive statement I too profess a relativist ontology, interpretivist epistemology, and play a range of roles that influence my own reflections on this study and our work. As researcher I am fascinated by the role epistemology can play in enabling, enhancing, or indeed limiting learning potential. Having been a teacher previously and a coach of various sports for over 35 years my passion to understand and influence learning has stemmed from wanting to know how best to impart positive change for my pupils and players. I am constantly striving to uncover phenomenon that will make a difference to all those who share this challenge and see research into the teaching and coaching act as a wonderful lens on which to base future recommendations.

Being the Director of Studies for Matt (DoS), my aim was to support his research journey providing guidance and advice where necessary whilst ensuring that the direction and end point was driven by him rather than by the supervisory team. As such I am confident that this undertaking has been a true example of co-created learning as we both have bounced back and forth our ideas, concerns, and new insights into our field of study.

In this paper, work is presented in relation to the six-stages of RTA. Initially, the process of what happened in Matt's PhD is described through examples for clear understanding of contexts and actions during his study. Following this, reflections on the process are provided, arranged as reflexive narratives from both Matt and David. Each of the six stages are outlined in turn, to allow future sport and coaching researchers the opportunity to view a 'guide' to RTA. The researcher reflections are important here too in allowing future sport and coaching researchers to understand more deeply how and why the analysis happened. The intention is not that future researchers will walk in our shoes but that they may become clearer in their decision making when it comes to selecting their own footwear when treading the RTA path.

RTA in action

The RTA process below is taken from a study which involved ten SSIs of cricket coaches. SSI were conducted by Matt and lasted between 66 and 115 minutes (mean duration 93 mins). The study was the final empirical stage of Matt's doctoral thesis.

Steps 1 and 2: Familiarisation and initial coding

Whilst transcription is a well-documented, lengthy and time-consuming process (McMullin, 2021), this part of the research ultimately began the familiarisation with

the data. Listening and re-listening to each interview, both questions and responses, enabled Matt to be transported back to the time and location of the interview. Ultimately, bringing the previously lived experience back to the surface initiated his connection to the data as part of the transcription process. Secondly, given there were multiple participants involved, interviews were transcribed in tandem. That being, it was not necessary to complete transcribing one interview prior to starting the next. This was done for two reasons. Firstly, it broke up the potential monotony of the transcription process. Secondly, and in aiding the familiarisation process, starting, stopping and re-starting the transcription of interviews forced Matt to re-invest in practically ‘where they had gotten to’ in each interview. Matt began to know each interview in much more detail. As a final step in the familiarisation process, completed transcripts were read (in full).

In outlining the coding process, the interview transcript was placed in a table with two columns. The text of the transcript was placed in the left column (titled; transcript). The right-hand column was used for initial codes. In aiding this process, this column was titled; what is being talked about here? This prompt helped Matt to consider both the semantic (i.e. explicit meaning) and latent (i.e. conceptual/implicit) aspects of the transcript. Codes ranged from one word to short sentences to ensure they were meaningful to the researcher. Notes were also made in respect to a small number of codes which needed further clarification and/or review. Examples of this process can be found below in figures 1 and 2.

Transcript	What is actually being said here? <i>Be confident in my reasoning!</i>	Research Notes / Questions
<p>AB (16.07) Then in terms of more technical aspects of it while playing the spinning ball is a big one. Can you rotate the strike? What's your single and boundary option? What's your low risk option? What should get out of jail shot? And all that jazz. But also playing that moving ball. Either reversing or not reversing. Because you will face the new ball at some point so whether you are coming in early on and you've lost a few wicket or the second new ball. So it's kind of a case of playing for your off stump, playing late, being very concise but positive with your feet movement with your transfers.</p>	<p>Some key technical components as a batter playing red ball cricket – big spin and moving ball</p>	<p><i>The way these are presented as questions appears to suggest that individuals can 'choose' however the closing aspect – where everyone is going to have to do this at some stage, makes it feel less negotiable? Where is the coach really?</i></p>

Figure 1. An example of initial coding process with accompanying research note

Transcript	What is actually being said here?
<p>SK So the learning came a little bit push from me but showing him worlds best and then able then for him to get a better understanding. If somebody walking the dog would have walked past and the second session. They would have seen us working specifically at the crease through intervention poles. For example, with some poles in there, you know. If he doesn't stay up right in the action. He clattered one of the poles with his arms or his head. So there was a lot of intervention initially. And then so, over repetition and understanding of what he was doing, it created what I call checkpoints and there were three learning checkpoints. So now, even when I work with Sam moving forward. I say how are you going on your checkpoints today? And he'll say ah - I'm doing nicely. I'm keeping weight forward in my run up. His first checkpoint, his second. Checkpoint is my load up staying lovely and clean, and I'm able now to drive my front side at my target and finish my action off so I know that's a lot of information, but they were based into three checkpoints, worked over quite a period of time.</p>	<p>Part (and) Blocked practice initially (technical refinement)</p> <p>Coaching using (physical) constraints</p> <p>Creating technical checkpoints for the player? [Source/Certainty?]</p>

Figure 2. An example of initial coding

Clarification was also aided by re-listening to the audio for a given section of transcript. Doing so led to an increased level of (implicit) criticality in the coding process and avoided Matt becoming ‘too comfortable’ in the coding of a transcript with which he was by now, very familiar. Essentially, re-visiting a part-coded transcript after coding another, led to questioning the relevance of the existing codes. The final stage of coding was to review any codes which were signposted for review.

Researcher reflections: Matt

I really did feel like I knew my transcripts inside out after the familiarisation process. I think the randomness by which I transcribed the interviews really helped (i.e. a bit of interview 1, then some of interview 2 etc.) as it forced me to reinvest in each of the transcripts multiple times. Transcribing is not the most attractive of propositions to me. In my mind however the benefits outweighed the costs.

In attempting the coding process, I should also identify a second prompt. In the header of the right-hand column, I also wrote; ‘*Be confident in my reasoning!*’ The use of RTA ensured that this was an important statement. Reflecting with horror on my previous use of TA as an undergraduate, coupled with the significant learning I had done around RTA, there were a few things I knew. One. It was my coding. Not David’s, not other researchers. Mine. It is absolutely necessary for me to use the skills, experiences and knowledge to positively contribute to the coding process. I began to not only truly understand but become comfortable that I should look at my data through my own eyes and make my own interpretative choices throughout the analytic process (Braun and Clarke, 2016). This position had previously been influenced by my working

assumptions of TA being underpinned by the principles of coding reliability. Two. Coding was an ongoing process. Codes could be developed, changed, altered as my analysis unfolded. It is well accepted in the research that changes can occur during coding to better capture the researchers developing understanding and conceptualisation of the data (Braun *et al.*, 2019). Of course, this was going to happen. Previously I was worried that I would lose credibility for making alterations. Now my mindset was that I wouldn't be credible if my there wasn't some movement in my codes. Three. Coding gets better as the research project continues and researchers continue to immerse themselves in the data and engage repeatedly (Terry *et al.*, 2017). My coding would get better as I continued to invest in the process.

Supervisor's reflection: David

Matt took an interesting stance in stages 1 and 2 evidenced by his greater confidence and understanding of his pivotal role within the process. Of course, many alternative methods of familiarisation are available. I love to listen and re-listen to the interviews. I play them in the car, when out running, cycling etc. I prefer to keep the different interviews distinct. Nothing to mix up things in my mind and confuse. I also prefer to transcribe each interview all at once, with no gaps and no interruptions. This does mean that I need to block out at least 4 hours for every hour of interview data I am transcribing. It really is a lengthy yet valuable process. Transcription software is available and is much improved in recent years, but I have always found immersing myself in the data has been the best method for me and has allowed a much deeper level of understanding and reflection. Matt's transcription and coding too, was thoughtful and extensive. The application of both semantic and latent codes though not fully apparent at the time proved extremely valuable in later stages and ensured that he engaged in a greater synthesis of meaning. This also enabled Matt to avoid any over generalisation or description and confirmed that he was really able to develop and construct his own story from the data which he coded.

Steps 3 and 4: Creating and reviewing themes

At the outset, transcript codes were dragged and dropped from the transcript document into a Microsoft excel document. As more codes were inputted, similar codes were grouped, with tentative labels allocated, to start the creation of themes. These initial themes are known as candidate themes (Braun *et al.*, 2019). Importantly, themes were not labelled immediately simply by having more than one code. On a practical note to readers, participant's transcripts in the studies were assigned a colour. Hence, when codes became grouped into themes, the researcher was still able to easily access transcripts and hence key quotes for writing up. In re-focusing, candidate themes were labelled as the analysis developed. Importantly, there were no set parameters on when themes were given labels. As the analysis developed, candidate themes were continually reviewed, split and renamed as part of the ongoing review process prior to being confirmed as final themes. An example of reviewing themes (i.e. stage 4) can be found below in figure 3.

Original Candidate Theme (i.e. creating themes)	Subsequent Developed Themes (i.e. reviewing themes)	Transcript Codes
Knowledge is created by the learner/co-created	Player leading collaborative learning	Players need to be able to figure it out for themselves in games, so they have to figure it out in training too
		Collaborative sharing of ideas between players (and coach) [playing spin]
		Players learning from players [playing spin]
		Player to player sharing/learning away from training (in the pool)
		Players sharing ideas with each other
		Players learning for themselves is more powerful than being told
		Learning happens by player finding a way, not by being told (passed down)
		Coaching practice to help develop decision making with the player(s)
		'Discovery style' coaching
		Learning more 'memorable' if the learner is in control' [??]
		Coach as 'sounding board' with more experienced players
		Questions to support player learning
	Collaborative Q+A as the coaching approach	
	Questioning approach in red ball cricket to help players unpack their in-game approach	
	Use of questions to get the players to lead	
	Using questions as a coaching approach	
	Coaches don't know	Knowledge co-created more in WB cricket because coaches "don't know"
		White ball cricket has developed so much that coaches don't know it so the role becomes a facilitator
	Keeping the Individual within the process	Passing down knowledge from experts might be limiting players
		Players can use their own processes as opposed to a technical model
		The models experts use might not be the best models for the individual player
	Q+A Approach supported by video	Using questions to explore video footage (collaborative)
		Using video footage (of player) collaboratively

Figure 3. Stage 4. Reviewing previous candidate themes and defining new ones as part of RTA.

Researcher reflections: Matt

Undoubtedly this stage is the exciting part, where the analysis really begins. That being said, one specific area of RTA that I had not encountered previously was the idea of organising concepts. In becoming more comfortable, it became clear in my mind that my organising concepts, better named biases, informed the creation and labelling of my themes. These organising concepts reflected my experiences, cultural memberships and ideological commitments eluded to earlier (Braun *et al.*, 2019). It was here that my cricket coaching expertise and experiences integrated with the research process. The specific areas of expertise and areas of real interest manifested themselves through the organising concepts. Accordingly, my organising concepts were; i) Macro level organisational alignment; ii) Coaching practice and pedagogy; iii) Power relationships in the coaching process. These were the lenses through which I looked at my data. My enhanced understanding of organising concepts and linking to *the Big Q* approach I was engaging in, was fundamental step in understanding that my analysis would differ to that of a colleague's. It is not just that RTA 'does not require' consensus coding (i.e. researcher agreement). It is the fact that philosophically a *Big Q* approach acknowledges that meaning is contextual. That there are multiple realities. Consequently, I developed my organising concepts based on my reality. In linking to reliability and trustworthiness, sincerity had become an aspect of real importance.

In progressing and reflecting on the creation and review of themes, my previous experiences in the earlier studies of the thesis stood me in good stead. Speaking freely, moving codes into candidate themes is not terribly difficult in the early stages. As this process developed, I continued to lean on the idea that 'coding and theme development in reflexive TA is not to accurately summarize the data...The aim is to provide a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data, grounded in the data' (Braun *et al.*, 2019:848). As this stage drew to a close, I revisited the premise of latent coding to ensure analysis was going beyond what was explicitly stated. This also helped to ensure that I was working toward meaningful storybook themes.

As a final reflection, once themes had been labelled, I reviewed them (i.e. stage 4). My strategy was to select a code(s) from within a theme. I then revisited the transcript(s) from which the code had originated. Doing so enabled me to review the original data and hence 'check' the appropriateness of the label I had allocated against the original participant quote. Whilst our work so far has repeatedly discussed the individuality and uniqueness of RTA, the approach taken was based on two things. Firstly, the ever present low levels of self-assuredness from the lead researcher. Secondly, the notion that this would be presented to external reviewers, in many forms (i.e. from David as supervisor of my studies, a second supervisor, examiners of the thesis and journal reviewers). Could I absolutely, with clarity and conciseness of thought say that the themes I had developed were grounded in the data? If I was pressed in my PhD viva to take the examiner through my analysis, would I be confident that it would 'stand up'? The randomness of the approach here was important too. It avoided my simply patting myself on the back with themes that I was confident already did the job. As might be expected, a number of theme labels were altered. Some became more compelling, others became more grounded in the data (Braun *et al.*, 2019). At times too, a small number of codes were moved into more appropriate themes that had been developed since their original placing. In a previous life I would have worried that this tinkering and moving 'after analysis' would have made my analysis flawed. Now? This is the reflexive part.

Supervisor’s reflection: David

As Matt identifies, this part of RTA is critical to the process. My role was to be a critical friend and gently probe and challenge Matt’s creations whilst not imposing my views and most importantly not changing any of Matt’s own terminology or constructions. To clarify, the focus of my input here was to support Matt’s search of his organising concepts. This element of RTA can be somewhat confusing and yet is pivotal in what is finally produced in the study. As Matt explains above this was all his own work as it has to be for submission of his PhD, “I developed my organising concepts based on my reality”. My own similar reality and background however allowed me to highlight similar teaching and coaching experiences and start a dialogue with Matt about how he had reacted in such situations and what were the underpinning ideas, concepts and theories that he recognised has shaped his own actions. In this way I hoped to support Matt’s reflections without placing any of my own value judgements within the analysis.

Steps 5 and 6: Defining and creating storybook themes

As a result of the previous RTA stages, there were a significant number of themes that had been identified. The final phases involved creating larger, overarching themes known as storybook themes. A storybook theme should represent the patterning of shared meaning and capture implicit meaning beneath the surface (Clarke, 2017). Storybook themes should tie together all a researchers’ analytic observations and clearly present the story that is trying to be told (Clarke, 2017). In order to focus explicitly on building existing themes into storybook themes, a new document was created (again using Microsoft Excel) for only the labels (i.e. codes were no longer present). In doing so, the picture, literally, became clearer and the final step in the analysis process simpler. As a final note, it was important to recognise the premise that ‘final theme names should succinctly cue the reader in to what they can expect to read about in the theme, and draw them into wanting to read the analysis’ (Braun *et al.*, 2019:857). An example of the development of a storybook theme can be found below in figure 4, along with a reflexive diary extract from the lead author at the time of defining and creating storybook themes.

Transcript Code	Lower Order Theme	Storybook Theme
The academy prepares players for the next step	Developing self-sufficient players who can input on their own development	This is how we do it...in academy stage coaching
Developing responsible and self-sufficient players		
Micro-level player freedom within coach led macro level framework		
Player-Coach collaboration on player development plans (PDP)		
The speed of learning can vary	Learning takes time	
Players having a want and willingness to learn	Underpinning aspects of the learning environment	
Uber positive behaviours in the learning environment		

Figure 4. An example of the development of a storybook theme

Date: xx/xx/xxxx

Subject of Reflexive Note: Creating Storybook Themes

These lower order themes are the day to day. It's what the whole thing is about. They are the influences and reasons although they aren't always said out loud. Everyone (the coaches) knows them and it's just a given. So, 'cue' the reader? This is like the Ronseal adverts – 'it does exactly what is says on the tin'. So not funky but clear. The themes already have good labels so what links it all together? Well, it's what they do. But it's not for 'all' cricket coaching. It's only like this at this level.

Researcher reflections: Matt

Having spent much time in my studies (and earlier in this paper) boldly stating my *Big Q* research philosophy, the creation of storybook themes was the final hurdle. I was aware of the consequences of presenting somewhat underdeveloped domain summaries (Clarke, 2017) and leaving much of the story of my analysis untold. Importantly too was the sense that a truly in-depth analysis and realisation of themes can inform actionable outcomes (Clarke, 2017). Accordingly, I embarked on developing increasingly interpretive and creative storybook themes which 'invited readers in' (Clarke, 2017). I must admit, I initially felt some pressure. I am not the most creative person and began to feel that I would be judged on how funky or out there my storybook themes were.

Ultimately, I went back to the beginning. What is the work all about? Previously in this paper we used the phrase; a compelling interpretation (of the data). This then became important. Compelling, not definitive. Readers may well have a different opinion. Compelling, to me, begins some sort of thinking, a weighing up process. This is what I wanted from my storybook themes. Secondly, who was this work for? Acknowledging that my dual target was those working within the coaching profession and more specifically the sport of cricket, certainly helped focus my mind. I could hear participant quotes in my mind from interviews I had completed. Given the way in which the storybook themes resonated with the data I could see in my mind's eye, I knew I had given the RTA process a good go.

Supervisor's reflection: David

Storybook themes are a great way to communicate the researcher's reality in a way that stays true to the data. By describing and explaining his themes to me (wearing both hats as researcher and coach) in our meetings Matt was able to refine their semantics in order to gain my full comprehension of what he had built. In this way I was confident that Matt's themes related his key findings in a way that was accessible and meaningful to his target audience. What was most important however was how these themes resonated with Matt himself. He had invested so much of himself within the analysis, and this was clearly evident through every section of his study write up. It was fitting that his storybook themes articulated his findings so eloquently to the cricketing and research communities and in such a rich and sincere manner.

Recommendations for future sports coaching researchers using RTA

Addressing the final aim of our work, this section offers recommendations to early researchers in sport and coaching undertaking RTA, providing them with prompts to aid the RTA process, as opposed to orders which must be followed.

Recommendation 1: Consider from the outset how readers will evaluate your work and recognise the rigour and trustworthiness of your research

Researchers engaging in RTA are encouraged to maintain a *Big Q* approach across the process. Whilst this is important when undertaking the six steps of RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2013) it is also important in relation to the wider research process, in particular when considering to what extent your research process can be understood and followed by others. As Tracy (2010:841) noted, for ‘qualitative research to be of high quality, it must be rigorous’. However, what is meant by rigor can vary immensely and can mean different things to different people in different contexts. However, Smith and McGannon (2018:103) recognise that rigor has ‘largely been described as a marker of excellence sought through method’.

Aligning to the *Big Q* interpretivist positioning of RTA one must however be careful when explaining concepts of rigour and trustworthiness, and also refrain from offering ill conceived ‘limitations’ in order to seem humble to the audience. It is too easy to select processes that are mis-aligned and at odds with your research philosophy. Specifically, one may see references to co-researcher agreement metrics, criterion-based validity assessment, and/or processes of theme/code/data saturation discussion. These belong outside RTA when researching different questions that have different aims and outcomes and stem from a more neo-positivist outlook (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Instead, we need to contemplate our own needs and that of the target audience. Here we can think through how a pilot study can add value and insight to the larger study. We can provide a thorough audit trail to evidence how our codes are built from raw data and how these codes are assembled into the initial themes that then allow us to construct and develop these further.

As a result, it may be useful for researchers to maintain a reflexive diary whilst undertaking RTA (and/or the research project more generally). In doing so, the reflexive diary would aid researchers’ abilities to track their thoughts, feelings and emotions whilst engaging in RTA. The use of a reflexive diary is not to make sure that analysis is being done ‘right’. Maintaining a diary enables researchers to showcase (and hence share with future readers of their work) the perspectives that were influencing them during analysis, i.e. thoughts on developing themes and reflections on individual research participants as the research process plays out. For example see Nadin and Cassell (2006) for further detail.

We therefore need to look with frank honesty to articulate our own biases and organising concepts for those engaging with our work. We must use the most appropriate methods to let them see inside our thematic composing. At the heart of everything we do needs to be a clear alignment to our ontology and epistemology – and these need to be explicitly articulated. From our relativist position we must

therefore reject methods such as member checking, inter-rater reliability, and full criterion validity measures, as these contradict our view that there are multiple realities, ‘that knowledge is subjective and our interpretive activities as researchers are always informed by our own assumptions, values and commitments’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013:285). Instead, we can apply methods more associated with our position such as member reflections, the use of critical friends (see recommendation below) and lists of criteria specifically chosen for the specific data under study (see Levitt *et al.*, 2017; Morse, 2015; Schinke *et al.*, 2013; Smith *et al.*, 2015; Wolcott, 1994 for a fuller description of these methods).

Recommendation 2: Use internal and external member reflections to support the reflexive process

Reflexive Thematic Analysis is more immersive and committing for the researcher compared to other versions of TA. In TA when undertaking data analysis within a research team, the quest for increased coding reliability (i.e. consensus coding) is philosophically misaligned to RTA. Researchers are however encouraged to use others (e.g. research and work colleagues, partners etc.) not to ‘check’ their work but rather to engage in meaningful dialogue regarding the ongoing analysis. This process has recently been promoted by many qualitative researchers and termed as the use of ‘critical friends’. Here, critical dialogue takes place with the researcher explaining their data interpretations whilst their ‘friends’ listen and offer critical feedback. Cowan and Taylor (2016:508) note that the role of the critical friends is ‘not to agree or achieve consensus but rather to encourage reflexivity by challenging each other’s construction of knowledge’. Here the aim is simply to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, the multiple and alternative explanations and interpretations that can be considered in relation to the data and its analysis.

In RTA an example of this is the development of storybook themes. If storybook themes are aimed at providing a succinct yet enticing overview, discussing the storybook themes with others in a supportive process can help researchers understand whether their storybook themes are doing what they ‘say on the tin’. In relation to a comment made earlier in relation to the researcher as sculptor (Terry *et al.*, 2017) there may only be one with a chisel in hand yet others behind the scenes acting as sounding boards (Smith *et al.*, 2014).

Recommendation 3: Be bold in the belief that meaning is situated and is contextual in nature

When using RTA, it is important to remember that you have made the decision to embark on an interpretive investigation of meaning. One that is highly situated and contextual. This is relevant in a number of ways. Firstly, that the meaning of the

data i.e. the SSI, FG or other qualitative method is situated in the context in which it was gathered, by those that it was produced by i.e. researcher and participant. Secondly, that the meaning attributed to the data by the researcher is contextual. This is based on the macro-level research context e.g. organisational aims, alongside increasingly micro-level and well-documented considerations such as the individual characteristics of the researcher. Finally, readers will develop their own meaning. Their context and characteristics are likely to be different to those of the researcher. Consequently, their view will be, and should be, unique. Those undertaking RTA should be comfortable and confident in the knowledge that the analysis process is unique and unlikely to be replicated. Braun and Clarke (2013) do however note that qualitative research results can be generalizable, but just not in the same way as quantitative results are. Smith (2018) presents four types of generalizability that might be used in qualitative research in beneficial ways; naturalistic generalizability, transferability, analytical generalizability and intersectional generalizability. In such a way RTA research can be extremely personal and yet has the ability to transcend and have impact beyond the personal boundaries of the researchers themselves. As Smith (2018:10) states ‘the research produced can offer great benefits without it being generalizable in the traditional statistical-probability meaning of the word’.

Conclusion

Our aims were to share an original, lived process of doing RTA from an interpretive perspective, with data from a sports coaching context. Secondly, to share reflections of a sports coaching researcher who has undertaken the RTA process. Given the plethora of approaches to TA being used across sports coaching research, RTA, we claim, is a particularly useful research tool for deeper insights to scenarios and settings being researched – and the researcher conducting it. Significantly, our work offers users a guide to this process. It does not offer users a set of instructions.

Recommendations have been made for future researchers to consider and make informed judgements about using RTA, which are regarded here as positive reasons for sports coaching researchers to engage with it. Armed with this knowledge and insight to its practical application we hope researchers will be able to align their philosophical positioning with their research practice and enjoy the reflexive journey of discovery that may lay ahead for them.

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JQRSS Author Profiles

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Reviewer Comments

In their reflexive correspondence valuable insight to the supervision relationship is offered between Matt the student, and David his PhD supervisor. While this was not the main focus of the article it is revealed strongly. On display is trust between both colleagues and complete buy-in to the methodological stance for conducting this kind of interpretive research. There is a strong sense of both growing with the research; of finding their voice through reflexivity and becoming more confident with the look and sound (style) of their own critique at each stage. Usefully, there is a practical guide in this offering which brings structure i.e. a certain logic in their context, to an otherwise 'messy' process of making sense of their investigation. That is, making sense of their discoveries and thinking through their positionality to see particular things. In the words of Bourdieu, they have brought order to the chaos through their reflexive writing, and the research process is more accessible for it.

