Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns(themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich)detail. However, frequently if goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). The range of different possible thematic analyses will further be highlighted in relation to a number of decisions regarding it as a method (see below). Thematic analysis is widely used, but there is no clear agreement about what thematic analysis is and how you go about doing it (see Attride-Stirling, 2001; Boyatzis, 1998; Tuckett, 2005, for other examples). It can be seen as a very poorly branded method, in that it does not appear to exist as a 'named' analysis in the same way that other methods do (eg, narrative using thematic analysis in psychology 79

analysis, grounded theory). In this sense, it is often not explicitly claimed as a method of analysis, when, in actuality, we argue that a lot of analysis is essentially thematic!/ but is either claimed as something else (such as DA, or even content analysis (eg, Meehan et al ., 2000)) or not identified as any particular method at all !/for example, data were 'subjected to qualitative analysis for commonly recurring themes' (Braun and Wilkinson, 2003: 30).If we do not know how people went about analyzing their data, or what assumptions informed their analysis, it is difficult to evaluate their research, and to compare and/or synthesize it with other studies on that topic, and it can impede other researchers carrying out related projects in the future (Attride-Stirling, 2001). For these reasons alone, clarity on the process and practice of the method is vital. We hope that this paper will lead to more clarity around thematic analysis. Relatedly, insufficient detail is often given to reporting the process and detail of analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). It is not uncommon to read of themes 'emerging from the data (although this issue is not limited to thematic analysis). For example, Singer and Hunter's (1999: 67) thematic discourse analysis of women's experiences of early menopause identified that 'several themes emerged' during the analysis. Rubin and Rubin (1995: 226) claim that analysis is exciting because 'you discover themes and concepts embedded throughout your interviews'. An account of themes 'emerging' or being 'discovered' is a passive account of the process of analysis, and it denies the active role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers (Taylor and Ussher, 2001).4The language of 'themes emerging':can be misinterpreted to mean that themes 're-side' in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will 'emerge' like Venus on the half shell. If themes 'reside' anywhere, they reside in our heads from

our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them. (Ely et al .,1997: 205 !/6)At this point, it is important to acknowledge our own theoretical positions and values in relation to qualitative research. We do not subscribe to a naıve realist view of qualitative research, where the researcher can simply ‘give voice’ (see Fine, 2002) to their participants. As Fine (2002): 218) argues, even a ‘giving voice’ approach ‘involves carving out unacknowledged pieces of narrative evidence that we select, edit, and deploy to border our arguments’. However, nor do we think there is one ideal theoretical framework for conducting qualitative research, or indeed one ideal method? What is important is that the theoretical framework and methods match what the researcher wants to know and that they acknowledge these decisions, and recognize them as decisions. The thematic analysis differs from other ana-lytic methods that seek to describe patterns across qualitative data !/ such as ‘thematic ’DA, thematic decomposition analysis, IPA, and grounded theory.5 Both IPA and grounded theory seek patterns in the data but are theoretically bound. IPA is attached to a phenomenological epistemology(Smith et al ., 1999; Smith and Osborn,2003), which gives experience primacy(Holloway and Todres, 2003), and is about understanding people’s everyday experience of reality, in great detail, in order to gain an understanding of the phenomenon in question (McLeod, 2001). To complicate matters, grounded theory comes in different versions (Charmaz, 2002). Regardless, the goal of a grounded theory analysis is to generate a plausible !/ and useful !/ theory80 V Braun and V Clarke

of the phenomena that is grounded in the data (McLeod, 2001). However, in our experience, grounded theory seems increasingly to be used in a way that is essentially grounded theory ‘lite’ !/ as a set of procedures for coding data very much akin to thematic analysis. Such analyses do not appear to fully subscribe to the theoretical commitments of a ‘full-fat’ grounded theory, which requires analysis to be directed to-wards theory development (Holloway and Todres, 2003). We argue, therefore, that a named and claimed’ thematic analysis means researchers need not subscribe to the implicit theoretical commitments of grounded theory if they do not wish to produce a fully worked-up grounded theory analysis. The term ‘thematic DA’ is used to refer to a wide range of pattern-type analysis data, ranging from thematic analysis within a social constructionist epistemology (ie, where patterns are identified as socially produced, but no discursive analysis is conducted), to forms of analysis very much akin to the interpretative repertoire form of DA (Clarke, 2005). Thematic decomposition

analysis (eg, Stenner, 1993; Ussher and Mooney-Somers, 2000) is a specifically named form of ‘thematic’ DA, which identifies patterns (themes, stories) within data, and theorizes language as constitutive of meaning and meaning as social. These different methods share a search for certain themes or patterns across an(entire) data set, rather than within a data item, such as an individual interview or interviews from one person, as in the case of biographical or case-study forms of analysis, such as narrative analysis (eg, Murray,2003; Riessman, 1993). In this sense, they more or less overlap with thematic analysis. As thematic analysis does not require the detailed theoretical and technological knowledge of approaches, such as grounded theory and DA, it can offer a more accessible form of analysis, particularly for those early in a qualitative research career. In contrast to IPA or grounded theory (and other methods like narrative analysis DA or CA), thematic analysis is not wedded to any existing theoretical framework, and therefore it can be used within different theoretical frameworks (although not all), and can be used to do different things within them. Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, or it can be a constructionist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. It can also be a contextualist method, sitting between the two poles of essentialism and construction-ism, and characterized by theories, such as critical realism (eg, Willig, 1999), which acknowledge the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings while retaining focus on the material and other limits of reality. Therefore, thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ' reality’. However, it is important that the theoretical position of a thematic analysis is made clear, as this is all too often left unspoken (and is then typically a realist account). Any theoretical framework carries with it a number of assumptions about the nature of the data, what they represent in terms of the ‘the world’, ‘reality’, and so forth. A good thematic analysis will make this transparent. A number of decisions Thematic analysis involves a number of choices which are often not made explicit using thematic analysis in psychology 81

(or are certainly typically not discussed in the method section of papers), but which needs explicitly to be considered and discussed. In practice, these questions should be considered before the analysis (and sometimes even collection) of the data begins, and there needs to be an ongoing

reflexive dialogue on the part of the researcher or researchers with regard to these issues, throughout the analytic process. The method section of Taylor and Ussher's(2001) thematic DA of S&M provides a good example of research that presents this process explicitly; the method section of Braun and Wilkinson (2003) does not. What counts as a theme? A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. An important question to address in terms of coding is: what counts as a pattern/theme, or what 'size' does a theme need to be? This is a question of prevalence, in terms both of space within each data item and of prevalence across the entire data set. Ideally, there will be a number of instances of the theme across the data set, but more instances do not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial. As this is qualitative analysis, there is no hard-and-fast answer to the question of what proportion of your data set needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme. It is not the case that if it was present in 50% of one's data items, it would be a theme, but if it was present only in47%, then it would not be a theme. Nor is it the case that a theme is only something that many data items give considerable attention to, rather than a sentence or two. A theme might be given considerable space in some data items, and little or none in others, or it might appear in relatively little of the dataset. So, researcher judgment is necessary to determine what a theme is. Our initial guidance around this is that you need to retain some flexibility, and rigid rules really do not work. (The question of prevalence is revisited in relation to themes and sub-themes, as the refinement of analysis (see later) will often result in overall themes and sub-themes within those.)Furthermore, the 'keyness' of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures!/ but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question. For example, in Victoria's research on representations of lesbians and gay parents on 26 talk shows (Clarke and Kitzinger, 2004), she identified six 'key' themes. These six themes were not necessarily the most prevalent themes across the data set !/they appeared in between two and 22 of the 26talk shows !/ but together they captured an important element of the way in which lesbians and gay men 'normalize' their families in talk show debates. In this instance, her thematic analysis was driven by this particular analytic question. How she 'measured' prevalence is relevant, as pre-valence can be determined in a number of different ways. Prevalence was counted at the level of the data item (ie, did a theme appear anywhere in each individual talk show?). Alternatively, it could have been counted in terms of

the number of different speakers who articulated the theme, across the entire data set, or each individual occurrence of the theme across the entire data set (which raises complex questions about where an ‘instance’ begins and ends within an extended sequence of talk ! / see Riessman, 1993). Because prevalence was not crucial to the analysis presented, Victoria chose the most straightforward form,82 V Braun and V Clarke

but it is important to note there is no right or wrong method for determining prevalence. Part of the flexibility of thematic analysis is that it allows you to determine themes(and prevalence) in a number of ways. What is important is that you are consistent in how you do this within any particular analysis. There are various ‘conventions’ for representing prevalence in thematic (and other qualitative) analysis that does not provide a quantified measure (unlike much content analysis, Wilkinson, 2000) ! / for the majority of participants (Meehan et al .,2000: 372), ‘many participants’ (Taylor and usher, 2001: 298), or ‘a number of participants (Braun et al ., 2003: 249).Such descriptors work rhetorically to suggest a theme really existed in the data and to convince us they are reporting truthfully about the data. But do they tell us much? This is perhaps one area where more debate is needed about how and why we might represent the prevalence of them in the data, and, indeed, whether, if, and why prevalence is particularly important. A rich description of the data set or a detailed account of one particular aspect is important to determine the type of analysis you want to do, and the claims you want to make, in relation to your dataset. For instance, you might wish to provide a rich thematic description of your entire data set, so that the reader gets a sense of the dominant or important themes. In this case, the themes you identify, code, and analyze would need to be an accurate reflection of the content of the entire data set. In such an analysis, some depth and complexity is necessarily lost (particularly if you are writing a short dissertation or article with strict word limits), but a rich overall description is maintained. This might be a particularly useful method when you are investigating an under-researched area, or you are working with participants whose views on the topic are not known. An alternative use of thematic analysis is to provide a more detailed and nuanced account of one particular theme, or group of themes, within the data. This might relate to a specific question or area of interest within the data (a semantic approach ! / see below), or to a particular ‘latent’ theme (see below)across the whole or a majority of the data set. An example of this would be Victoria’s talk show paper, discussed previously (Clarke and Kitzinger, 2004), which examined normalization in lesbians’

and gay men's accounts of parenting. Inductive versus theoretical thematic analysis Themes or patterns within data can be identified in one of two primary ways in thematic analysis: in an inductive or 'bottom up' way (eg, Frith and Gleeson, 2004),or in a theoretical or deductive or 'top-down' way (eg, Boyatzis, 1998; Hayes,1997). An inductive approach means the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (Patton, 1990) (as such, this form of thematic analysis bears some similarity to grounded theory). In this approach, if the data have been collected specifically for the research (eg, via interview or focus group), the themes identified may bear little relation to the specific questions that were asked of the participants. They would also not be driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area or topic. Inductive analysis is therefore a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher's analytic preconceptions. In this sense, this form of thematic analysis is data-driven. Using thematic analysis in psychology 83