Reflecting on Reflections of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA): Exemplar Experiences and Recommendations for new researchers in sport and coaching

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Abstract

There is a growing body of work in sport, and sports coaching research in particular that is adopting qualitative methods. Critics have however identified a philosophical misalignment of methods being used. Many of these studies employ thematic analysis (TA) to explore and present their data without a clear appreciation of how the different stages of the process associate to the three different TA options: Codebook, Reliability Coding, or Reflexive Thematic Analysis. As a result, the purpose of our article it to provide neophyte sports coaching researchers with an in depth understanding of one TA method – that of 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. Reflections are then offered 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 in order to further explore related issues and provide additional insight to aid the learning process. Consequently, this paper offers an original 'double hermeneutic' insight into RTA that provides important knowledge and guidance for those considering this method. Recommendations are made in order to maximise the quality of future studies in sport and coaching and avoid any potential criticism of philosophical misalignment.

Keywords: qualitative, data analysis, research philosophy, interpretive, big q

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 the works key findings. Whilst in between these two aspects, researchers are faced with endless 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 overlook 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 areas of the process can be developed as a result of a good level of procedural knowledge (e.g. *how* to recruit participants; *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., 2021). 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 methods such as Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI) and Focus Groups (FGs) being extremely 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.

As a result, the work here 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 in order 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 method is as a result of significantly different philosophical underpinning (Clarke, 2017). Whilst RTA is the focus of this work, it is worth briefly outlining the two other approaches; (1) coding reliability; (2) 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. Prior to starting the analysis, these themes/ideas have previously 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 positive underpinnings. As examples, these approaches highlight the importance of 'reliability and replicability' (Braun et al., 2019, p. 847), areas of which truly interpretive work are less concerned. The remainder of this section outlines for readers the philosophical positioning of RTA.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis as a 'Big Q' approach

RTA, with its acceptance that ‘meaning’ is contextual and/or situated and that there are multiple realities, represents a *Big Q* approach (Kidder & Fine, 1987). As a result, RTA views positively the role of the researcher within the analysis process. After all, if meaning is contextual and it is accepted that there are multiple realities, the context and reality of the researcher is of significant importance! 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). As an immediate note to readers, this is almost at odds with the other forms of TA where the ‘bias’ the researcher brings can be viewed as a limitation of the work. As a final point on this matter, the themes therefore that are formed as part of the analysis are undoubtedly *constructed* by the researcher. They do not *emerge* from the data (as has previously been written!) like mythical creatures.

From a practical (i.e. *how to*) perspective, RTA follows a well-accepted 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 more detail.

Outlining the approach of the paper

Research Design

The paper utilised a reflexive personal narrative approach in the form of reflective episodes from both authors. This approach was utilised given narrative accounts embrace the uniqueness and complexity of individuals’ (in this case the authors’) lived experience (Carless & Douglas, 2017). As a result of the aims our work, using an approach which helps to shed light on the meaning of personal experience (Carless & Douglas, 2017) seems apt.

Participants: Researcher reflexivity statements

The following section introduces readers to the articles two key participants; Matt and David. In keeping with the style of the work, this is done via researcher reflexivity statements. Reflexivity is about self-examination. In doing so, we outline for readers 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 readers engagement in our work.

Matt – lead researcher, PhD student, university lecturer and qualified cricket coach. In exploring my position, as listed above I have many formal roles. Importantly, these roles enable me to bring a whole host of experience, skills and knowledge to the research process. I was going to attempt to identify my primary role from those listed however I think this would be remiss of me. For instance, whilst it might be argued the clear role I have is as a PhD student, my drive and ambition for undertaking PhD level 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 achievable level. As a result of being a highly 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 on the floor. 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 that I have to engage in new learning myself.

In addressing one of these new areas, undertaking research, I have previously engaged in primary research projects (i.e. dissertations) through my 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, that's right; 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! I generally hold an increasingly relative ontological outlook on life and hence become increasingly drawn to interpretive style work. As such, delving deeper into the analysis of such data was an important step.

Dave – 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 in various sports for over 35 years my passion to understand and influence learning has stemmed from not knowing 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 (DoS) my aim was to support Matt's research journey providing guidance and support where necessary whilst ensuring that the direction and end point was driven by him rather than by the supervisory team. As such I am extremely 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.

Structure of the paper

What follows is simple in structure. Work is presented in relation to the six-stages of RTA. Initially, *the process* of what happened in Matt's PhD study is made available with examples so the reader can fully appreciate the context in which it took place. Following this, *researcher reflections* on the process are provided, arranged as personal narratives.

In being clear, each of the six stages are outlined to allow future sport and coaching researchers the opportunity, if they so wish, 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 when it comes to selecting their own footwear when treading the RTA path!

RTA in action

For the purpose of this section, the process and reflections offered are in relation to a research study carried which involved the individual online SSI of cricket coaches *(n=10*). SSI were conducted by the lead author and lasted between 66 and 115 minutes (*mean duration = 93 minutes*). The study was the final empirical stage of the lead researchers' doctoral thesis.

Steps 1 and 2: Familiarisation and initial coding

The Process

Whilst transcription is a well-documented lengthy and time-consuming process (McMullin, 2021), this part of the process ultimately began the familiarisation with the data. Listening and re-listening to the interview, both questions and responses, enabled the lead researcher to be transported back to the time and location of the interview. Ultimately, bringing the previously lived experience *back to the surface* initiated the researchers' connection to the data as part of the transcription process.

Secondly, given there were multiple participants involved across the studies in question, interviews were transcribed in tandem. That being, it was not necessary to complete one interview prior to starting the next. This was done for multiple 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* the lead researcher to re-invest in practically 'where they had gotten to' in each interview. As a result, the lead researcher 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 the lead researcher 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 left by the lead researcher in respect to a small number of codes which needed further clarification and/or review. Examples of this process can be found below in Table 1a and 1b.

[Insert Tables 1a and 1b here]

Clarification was also aided by the re-listening of the audio of the section of transcript. As per the initial transcription process, coding of multiple transcripts took place simultaneously (i.e. coding of one transcript was not completed before another began). Doing so led to an increased level of (implicit) criticality in the coding process and avoided the lead researcher becoming 'too comfortable' in the coding of a transcript which they were by now, very familiar with. 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 the review of any codes which were signposted for review (referred to earlier).

Researcher reflections

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. Let's face it, transcribing is not the most attractive of propositions. In my mind however the benefits outweighed the costs.

In attempting the coding process, I should also identify a second prompt I used. In the header of the right-hand column I also wrote; 'Be subjectively-objective!' The use of RTA ensured that this was an important statement. As a result of my previous experiences (and the horror of reflecting 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. I am the *subjective* part. 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 & 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 researcher's 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.

David's reflection

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

The Process

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 to start the creation of themes (i.e., Figure 1). These initial themes are known as *candidate* themes (Braun et al., 2019). Importantly, themes were not labelled immediately simply as a result of having more than one code.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

As a practical note to readers, participants/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 reviewing themes (i.e. stage 4) can be found below in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Researcher reflections

Undoubtedly this stage is the exciting part. Where perhaps 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, perhaps better named biases, informed the creation and labelling of my themes. These organising concepts very much 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 in linking once again to the 'Big Q' approach I was engaging in, was another 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. As a result, at no point was I trying to pull the wool over anybody's eyes. Their eyes didn't matter. Only my own.

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 '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, p. 848). As a result, 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 here was to select (somewhat randomly) 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. To be clear, whilst our work so far has repeatedly discussed the individuality and uniqueness of RTA, the approach taken here 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. Was I ok with this? In a previous life I would have worried that this tinkering and moving ‘after analysis’ would have made my analysis and hence results and findings flawed. Now? This **is** the *reflexive* part.

David’s reflection

As Matt identifies this part of RTA is critical to the process. My role here 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

The process

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 of 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, p. 857).

An example of the development of a storybook theme can be found below in Table 3, along with a reflexive diary extract from the lead author at the time of defining and creating storybook themes.

[Insert Table 3 here; prior to reflexive diary extract]

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

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). As a result, 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 I know(!) 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.

David's Reflection

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

In addressing the final aim of our work, this section offers recommendations to future early researchers in sport and coaching undertaking RTA. In keeping an alignment to what this work is, and isn't, the recommendations are provided from both authors' experiences as a means of providing future researchers 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 & 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, p. 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, p. 103) recognise that rigor has been ‘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 to the reader, 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 & Clarke, 2019). Instead, we need to contemplate our own needs and that of target audience. Here we can think though 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. To be clear, the use of a reflexive diary is not to make sure that analysis is being done ‘right’. Maintaining a diary would enable researchers to showcase (and hence share with future readers of their work) the perspectives that were influencing them during analysis, thoughts on developing themes and reflections on individual research participants as the research process plays out. Readers are directed to previous work by Nadin and Cassell (2006) for further guidance.

Recapping our recommendation, we therefore need to look deep inside in order to articulate our own biases and organising concepts for the reader, and ensure we use the most appropriate methods to let the reader 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 to the reader. 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 that our interpretive activities as researchers are always informed by our own assumptions, values and commitments' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 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).

To summarise therefore, by considering how readers will appraise your work at its inception you will be able not only enhance the depth and transparency of the work but will provide clear markers for prospective readers whether academic reviewers, practitioners, or pracademics to judge the value and quality of your work.

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

Much was made in the earlier sections of this work in defining what RTA is, when compared to other versions of TA. Undertaking data analysis within a research team in 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 as may have previously been in vogue 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) note that the role of the critical friends is 'not to agree or achieve consensus but rather to encourage reflexivity by challenging each others' construction of knowledge' (pp. 508). 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 analysis.

In RTA a clear example of this comes in relation to the development of storybook themes (Nb. These conversations can take place at a much earlier stage too). 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 storybook themes are doing what they say on the tin! In relation to a comment made earlier in relation to the researcher as sculptor (i.e., 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 different to those of the researcher. Consequently, their view will be, and should be, unique. As a result, 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. Indeed 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, p. 10) states the research produced can 'offer great benefits' without it being generalizable in the traditional statistical-probability meaning of the word.

Conclusion

In drawing the work to a close, it is important to recap what our work is, and is not. The initial aims of our work were to share an original, lived process of doing RTA from an interpretive perspective, with data in a sports coaching context. Secondly, to share reflections of a sports coaching researcher who has undertaken the RTA process. This was an important requirement given the plethora of approaches to (R)TA being used across sports coaching research. RTA is clearly an increasingly useful research tool and in offering our work we hope that sports coaching researchers feel that little more comfortable in using RTA within their work. Significantly, our work offers users a guide to this process. Importantly however our work does not offer users a set of instructions.

This well reflects the position taken when offering recommendations for future sports coaching researchers engaging in RTA, the final aim of our work. Recommendations have been made for future researchers to consider and make informed judgements for themselves. Fundamentally these are seen as positive nudges for sports coaching researchers engaging in RTA moving forward. Not because RTA is going to take over the world. But because researchers in sports coaching can make increasingly informed decisions as to whether they will or will not use RTA in line with their philosophical positioning hence increasingly the clarity of the research landscape.

Biographical Notes

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