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# Iterative Thematic Inquiry: A New Method for Analyzing Qualitative Data

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# Iterative Thematic Inquiry: A New Method for Analyzing Qualitative Data

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## Abstract

Because themes play such a central role in the presentation of qualitative research results, we propose a new method, Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI), that is guided by the development of themes. We begin by describing how ITI uses pragmatism as a theoretical basis for linking beliefs, in the form of preconceptions, to actions, in the form of data collection and analysis. Next, we present the four basic phases that ITI relies on: assessing beliefs; building new beliefs through encounters with data; listing tentative themes; and, evaluating themes through coding. We also review several notable differences between ITI and existing methods for qualitative data analysis, such as thematic analysis, grounded theory, and qualitative content analysis. The use of ITI is then illustrated through its application in a study of exiters from fundamentalist religions. Overall, the two most notable features of ITI are that it begins the development of themes as early as possible, through an assessment of initial preconceptions, and that it relies on writing rather than coding, by using a continual revision of tentative results as the primary procedure for generating a final set of themes.

## Keywords

qualitative data analysis, pragmatism, iterative thematic inquiry

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This article introduces a new method for the analysis of qualitative data, based on a search for themes that not only begins the analysis process but continues throughout. This method builds on the central role that themes already play in the analysis and reporting of qualitative data. The importance of themes is manifest in many empirical articles, where the results are often summarized with statements such as, “There were three (or four or five) themes in the data.” Themes thus serve as a major data reduction device in qualitative research, where the complexity of the results are compressed into a small set of reporting units that organize the presentation of the results. Given the importance of themes in qualitative research, this article first clarifies how themes are used in qualitative analysis, and then presents a new analytic method, Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI).

The common first step in working with themes is to develop a definition, and the literature contains numerous statements about what themes are. For instance, DeSantis and Ugarriza (2000) performed a systematic review of the use of themes in the nursing literature, which produced this definition: “A theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a

recurrent experience and its variant manifestations. As such, a theme captures and unifies the nature or basis of the experience into a meaningful whole” (2000, p. 363). Other, less formal definitions typically include an emphasis on patterns:

Something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82)

Recurring patterns . . . or “gestalts” which pull together many segments of the data. (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 246)

A pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon. (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii)

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An underlying or more latent pattern or repetition discerned in the data. (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003, p. 912)

Working with a set of 20 different definitions of the themes from a wide variety of sources showed that the most common word used across the full list was “data” appearing in 11 of the definitions, followed by “meaning or meaningful” in nine, “pattern” in eight, and “recurring or repeated” in seven. Consolidating these shared elements, leads to the following definition: *a theme is a meaningful, recurring pattern in the data*. Of course, there is no one definition for themes that will fit all of qualitative research, but from the pragmatic perspective to be described in the next section, this summary has two missing elements, which leads to the following expanded definition: *a theme is a meaningful, recurring pattern that researchers first develop from the data, and then use to interpret that data for an audience*.

The first new element incorporated in this definition is the active role of the researcher in generating themes, which avoids the assumption that themes reside in the data, simply waiting to be uncovered. This appreciation of researchers’ direct involvement in producing themes is common in more recent work, such as Braun and Clarke (2006) and Vaismoradi et al. (2016), and the current definition follows Vaismoradi et al. (2016) in referring to this activity as the *development* of themes. In addition, the next section will show how this acknowledgment of the part that researchers play in developing themes corresponds to the pragmatist philosophical perspective that guides ITI.

The second additional element in the definition emphasizes that researchers’ goals are to create themes that speak to an intended audience. This aspect of themes has received less attention in earlier definitions (but see Thorne, 2016, p. 281). Emphasizing that themes are used for communication also indicates a shared understanding between the researchers and their audience that themes are an effective way to summarize the results of qualitative research. Further, from a pragmatist perspective, it is important to recognize that themes serve a purpose which guides researchers’ analytic activity.

Iterative Thematic Inquiry builds on the researcher’s dual role of both developing themes as patterns in the data and communicating those patterns to an audience. The fundamental point is that if themes will be the researcher’s ultimate basis for both developing and communicating the results of the research process, then the ongoing creation of themes should guide the analysis process throughout. Rather than postponing the search for themes until a relatively late stage in the research project, ITI calls for the continual development of themes as an organizing principle during the entire analysis process, starting in the earliest phases of that process.

The remainder of this article begins by locating the theoretical bases for ITI within the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. This is followed by a presentation of the four basic phases of ITI as a method: assessing initial beliefs as themes; building new beliefs during data collection; listing tentative themes; and, evaluating themes through coding.

After that development of ITI itself, there is a comparison to three other common approaches to qualitative analysis: thematic analysis, grounded theory, and qualitative content analysis. The last major section presents an illustrative example of ITI, which summarizes the second author’s research on the experiences of those who exited from fundamentalist Christian religions.

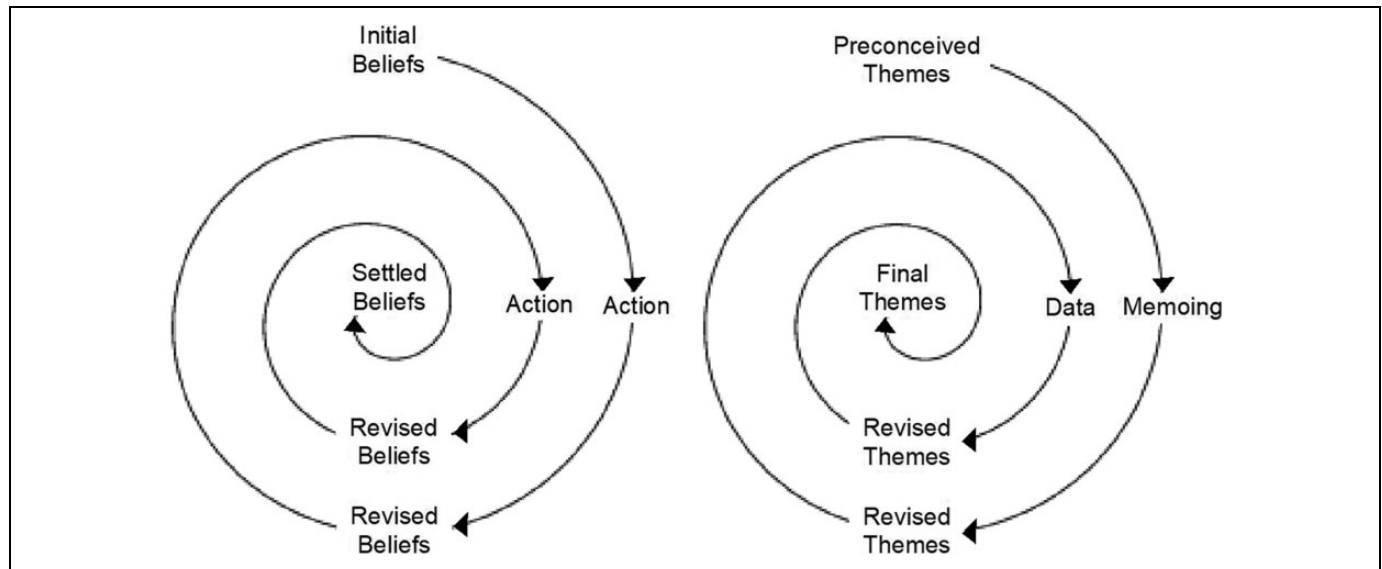
## Pragmatism as a Paradigm for Iterative Thematic Inquiry

ITI is philosophically based on pragmatism, and more specifically on John Dewey’s (1910) concept of inquiry (Morgan, 2014; Strubing, 2007), which he treated as a general approach to generating knowledge, with research as a formalized version of the inquiry process. For Dewey, inquiry begins with using existing beliefs and prior knowledge to interpret and define an experience that creates problems, questions, or uncertainty—in other words, something that cannot be accounted for with those existing beliefs. As the inquirer reflects on the nature of the problem and potential solutions, these are evaluated in terms of their likely consequences. The next step is taking action to resolve the problematic situation. Moving from Dewey’s general account to a statement in terms of research, problems and problematic situations become research questions, and action involves the collection and analysis of data.

Note, however, that Dewey’s (1910) approach to inquiry does not end with action, since it also requires an interpretation of the outcomes of that action. For Dewey, the outcome of “testing” a hypothesis is new knowledge that either reinforces or changes the beliefs that initiated the inquiry. From a research perspective, beliefs in the form of personal experience, knowledge of previous work on a subject, and encounters with existing theory provide a starting point that is in a constant state of flux, once the research process begins. This ongoing process brings beliefs and actions into a reciprocal relationship that is the essence of pragmatism.

The left-hand side of Figure 1 portrays this ongoing connection between beliefs and actions as an inward spiral that begins with an initial set of beliefs about the situation, which lead to actions, which in turn lead to revised beliefs. This process stops (at least temporarily) with “settled beliefs” that are no longer felt to require testing through further action. Strubing (2007) refers to this version of Dewey’s approach to inquiry as “iterative-cyclical problem-solving.”

For ITI, the right-hand side of Figure 1 portrays this problem-solving process as working with a set of themes that address the original research questions. The organizing principle behind these iterative cycles in ITI is the creation of a set of themes, based on actions that continue until the final set of themes fulfills the role of settled beliefs. This process begins with a set of preconceptions that the researcher brings to the research topic, which are then continually updated. At each iteration, existing beliefs are the basis for two kinds of action: memoing that reflects on the current choice of themes and data collection that tests those choices. In practice, this cycling is



**Figure 1.** The process of revising initial beliefs and pre-conceived themes.

likely to require several iterations of data collection, reflexive memoing, and multiple revisions of earlier themes, before settling on a set of themes that will serve as the results of the research.

Following this logic, data analysis begins the first time that something about the data leads the researcher to reconsider prior beliefs. This matches the pragmatic insistence that new data continually reformulates both the understanding of the original problem and the perceived means for addressing that problem. For ITI, this means that new insights need to be evaluated as potential themes that can communicate key results.

This iterative process of alternating between data collection and data analysis is also present in Grounded Theory, which is not surprising, given its shared roots in pragmatism (Bryant, 2009; Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Morgan, 2020; Strubing, 2007). Where ITI and grounded theory depart is that ITI is built around a continuing engagement with the researcher's beliefs about the research topic from the earliest possible point. In contrast, Glaser's "classic" version of grounded theory (2013) insists on avoiding all forms of preconceptions. Even within the constructivist version of grounded theory (e.g., Charmaz, 2014), which recognizes that a complete escape from preconceptions is impossible, such a priori knowledge is largely treated as interfering with what should be the discovery of theory through contact with the data. Rather than trying to eliminate the power of preconceptions, ITI emphasizes the importance of an explicit process for engaging with them. Still, there are numerous points of contact between ITI and grounded theory, and which are addressed in more detail in the section of the paper that compares ITI to other methods for the analysis of qualitative data.

Of course, the claim that qualitative researchers should alternate between prior beliefs and data analysis is hardly new.

What ITI adds is an identification of this iterative learning process with the work of building themes that both capture and communicate the research results. As a field, qualitative research has reached a tacit agreement that themes frequently provide a successful way to summarize what was learned from the data. Pragmatism takes up this challenge by arguing that, if themes represent the endpoint of the research, then the work involved in developing themes should be the driving force behind the whole research process. Hence, each act of data collection can challenge the researcher's existing beliefs about the appropriateness of a prior set of themes, until a final set of themes are accepted. ITI thus replaces an implicit sense that themes will somehow emerge during analysis with the explicit goal of producing themes, right from the beginning.

## **Pursuing Iterative Thematic Inquiry as a Method**

### *Undertaking an Iterative Thematic Inquiry*

The starting point for ITI can be either personal beliefs as an inductive source of themes or prior theory as a deductive source. Inductive approaches to ITI are likely to be exploratory in nature, based on the preference for avoiding existing theory as the basis for creating an original set of themes. In this case, preconceived beliefs will be the basis for stating the initial set of themes which will be updated continuously through subsequent contact with the data. Those preconceptions can come from any number of sources, including broad cultural assumptions, personal experience, or the research literature, but regardless of their origin, they will affect the collection and interpretation of the data.

The situation is somewhat different when the existing literature is used to produce deductively derived themes. In this

case, the themes that are generated before data collection starts will be based on a set of beliefs that are based on prior work in their field. As with induction, the initial step is to generate a set of themes that represent the expected outcomes for the current study, and this beginning is then questioned and revised throughout the rest of the analysis process.

The goal of creating themes is likely to feel familiar to experienced qualitative researchers, but those who are new to qualitative analysis may be less aware of the desirability of themes as an endpoint. One likely problem for newer researchers is thinking of themes in a narrow, descriptive fashion, rather than in broader, more interpretive terms. Morse (2008) refers to this as a confusion between themes and categories, where the latter are little more than groups of codes. A way to move past this issue is to develop themes that correspond to the research questions. If a project includes a statement of research questions, then the first step is to develop themes that summarize the initial expectations about the likely responses to those research questions. Although it may seem presumptuous to answer the research questions without any data, the actual goal is to investigate one's prior beliefs with regard to those questions. The ultimate answer to those questions is likely to be stated as a set of themes, so the preliminary summary should use the same format.

For those who are new to thinking thematically, the best way to become familiar with this process is to study existing articles that use themes to present their results. This process should itself be an active example of inquiry, which not only examines the themes that authors have chosen but also asks questions such as: How is each theme labeled, how is its meaning summarized, and how does the full collection of themes explain what was in the data? Once one has some mastery of how themes work in practice, then it is possible to use ITI as a set of procedures for producing such themes.

ITI proceeds in four basic phases, which can be remembered through the acronym ABLE:

*Assessing initial beliefs as themes:* Examines the researcher's preconceptions;

*Building new beliefs during data collection:* Develops content of existing themes;

*Listing tentative themes:* Produces a provisional statement of final themes;

*Evaluating themes through coding:* Ensures that the themes are appropriate.

### Phase One: Assessing Beliefs

The assessment phase of ITI centers on a reflexive process of reviewing one's prior beliefs about the research topic after entering the field. Of course, the advice to be reflexive is common in the literature on qualitative analysis, but aside from the suggestion that researchers should keep journals, there are surprisingly few practical procedures for engaging in reflexivity (for an exception, see Roulston, 2010). In contrast, ITI offers a specific mechanism for reflexivity, which is to write up a set of preliminary themes, using the same format as the ultimate

Results section, and then to revise that starting point throughout encounters with data.

Being as explicit as possible about one's initial perspectives is what makes it possible to question those preconceptions throughout the data collection process. This continual questioning is rather different from the well-known phenomenological process of "bracketing" prior beliefs, in order to set them aside. Instead, ITI insists on actively confronting and working with prior beliefs. And while the initial identification of prior beliefs does bear some resemblance to formulating "hypotheses" about what the end results will be, the goal in ITI is to recognize one's initial expectations so that they can be continually revised through contacts with the data.

The goal is to begin the analysis process by addressing one of the key issues in any form of qualitative analysis: the extent to which the ultimate conclusions arise from the data or from the researcher's own preconceptions. This requires an active reflection on how the researcher's prior experiences will influence the process of collecting and analyzing qualitative data. ITI begins by making these potential influences as explicit as possible, so that the repeated, conscious re-examination of potential themes can avoid the trap of simply reproducing an analyst's own preferred answers to the research questions.

In this case, the format for the implementation of reflexivity is based on a recognition that themes will be the basis for the ultimate summary of the research, so they should also provide the basis for exercises in reflexivity. More specifically, the format for a typical, theme-based Results section is assembled around a subsection for each theme, which begins by stating the theme's core content and then describing its relevance. The format for the reflexive exercise is to write up an imagined Results section using exactly this layout. This creates the first of what will be an evolving list of preliminary themes. For example, if there were three predicted themes, then there would be a summary of Theme A, Theme B, and Theme C, along with an accompanying set of memos explaining the contents and origins of each theme. In some cases, there might also be enough information available to discuss the possible intersections between three predicted themes (i.e., AB, AC, and BC).

On the surface, this is an exercise in creative writing, but at a deeper level, it is a way of encountering one's preconceptions about the research topics (Morgan, 2020). Writing up a preliminary Results section that is based on nothing but preconceptions forces researchers to recognize the ideas that influence their thinking prior to doing the research. Certainly, this can be an intimidating process, but there is no denying that such preconceptions exist, so the primary task is to make them explicit by stating them in the same format that will serve as the basis for the outcomes from the analysis process.

One obvious question at this point is: How many themes are enough, and how many are too many? As an answer, the number in published articles provides a target, which suggests between three and five themes. On the one hand, most research produces results that are too complex for only two themes. On the other hand, presenting more than five themes makes it hard for the reader to keep track of them all. In other words, both the

nature of qualitative research and nature of the audience point to the recommendation for a relatively manageable number of themes. Of course, there is nothing magical about using three to five themes but working within these limits during the initial assessment of beliefs is a useful prelude to what will be required in writing up the ultimate Results section.

The assessment phase in ITI begins with writing this pre-conceived Results section, but it is not limited to that initial exercise. In addition, the process of inventing and describing a preliminary set of themes should generate insights into the researcher's preconceptions, so a useful second step is to *write a memo for each of the proposed themes*. Where did the ideas for that theme originate? What kind of observations would either support or contradict it? And so on. The goal is to undo the analogy of the analysis process as a "blank slate" by using that slate for its intended purpose, writing.

This emphasis on writing in general and memoing more specifically is essential to ITI, and much of the analytic work in ITI consists of not only generating new memos but also continually adding to earlier ones. Memoing is thus a way to start the analysis process and to keep it moving throughout the research project. This matches a pragmatist point of view, where beliefs do not so much "emerge" as change, and where those changes occur through actions. This means that research is a rigorous process for the evolution of beliefs, and ITI argues for assessing prior beliefs as the first step in monitoring further changes in beliefs. Of course, all self-knowledge is unavoidably limited, but the advice here is that confronting one's preconceptions from the beginning is better than assuming that those preconceptions will somehow become evident as the research proceeds.

### **Phase Two: Building New Beliefs Through Encounters with the Data**

In ITI, working with the data is a learning process where *analysis happens every time researchers hear or observe something that has an impact on their prior beliefs*. Interestingly, some other methods for developing themes (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006) place this "immersion" at the end of the data collection process, where it is accomplished by reading and rereading interviews or field notes before undertaking a systematic process of coding. The counter-argument here is that by the time formal analysis begins, researchers will already know a great deal about what it is possible to say, based on their continual exposure to the data during the data collection process.

In ITI, the continual encounter with new data leads to an ongoing reconstruction of prior beliefs, as stated in the form of the previously developed themes. These changes are captured through memoing as a way to accomplish progressive changes in beliefs. This approach is most obvious in ethnography or participant observation, where the continual process of making field notes sets up an ongoing dialog with the data during its collection, and memos capture larger insights that go beyond immediate observations. For interviewing, the theme-building phase requires a conscious activity that usually occurs after

each completed interview. For both forms of data collection, ITI encourages memoing about everything that goes into the further evolution of the researcher's belief systems with regard to the topic. The point is not only to document the changes that are occurring in the preliminary set of themes but also to consider the data-driven sources of those changes.

There are three basic things that can happen during each contact with data: *beliefs can be reinforced, challenged, or expanded*. All of these can be sources of memo writing during the building phase. Starting with reinforcement, it is important to recognize that this is also a form of change, in the sense that beliefs can become more strongly held; given the subtlety of this process, it may require particular attention. Alternatively, both challenging existing beliefs and adding new elements to the belief system will typically involve the conscious recognition of change in beliefs.

As a concrete process, the building phase can be structured around rewriting the initial set of preliminary themes that formed the core of the assessment phase. In particular, every memo that directly addresses a new or existing theme can lead to revisions in the earlier write-up. This revision of the draft Results section certainly does not need to be done every time a new memo is generated, but at the same time, it should not be delayed for too long. The goal is to establish a balance between writing memos about ongoing insights and producing a summary of those insights in the form of a revised Results section.

In terms of revising the initial set of preliminary themes, one problem that needs to be avoided in ITI is deleting themes too soon. Instead, in the early stages of the project, it can be useful to increase the number of themes, because they can always be reduced or collapsed as the research proceeds. Further, a theme does not have to occur in every interview or observation for it to be important. Of course, allowing themes to multiply too rapidly only postpones the work of reducing them to a manageable number, but in practice it may be wise to let the number of themes grow, rather than deleting them prematurely and then needing to reconstruct them.

Another important aspect of the building phase is the potential need for reorganizing the earlier set of themes in terms of major themes and their subthemes. In some cases, two themes that originally appeared to be separate get joined as subthemes under a larger, overarching theme. Alternatively, what initially appeared to be a single theme may need to be divided into a set of subthemes. In practice, this amounts to a periodic review of how the current individual themes relate to each other, so that the organization of the emerging list is monitored on a continuing basis.

### **Phase Three: Listing Preliminary Themes**

At what point does it make sense to stop data collection and prepare a preliminary list of themes for the final stages of the analysis process? The answer to this question lies in the concept *theoretical saturation*. Beginning with the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), saturation has played a key role in determining when a sufficient amount of data has been collected. In

particular, theoretical saturation means that new data no longer advances the theoretical conclusions developed in the previous data collection. Because the ITI analysis system is so directly oriented to producing the ultimate results of the research, it provides a natural way to gauge when saturation has occurred. In ITI, the realization that theoretical saturation has occurred takes the form of finding no new materials for memo writing, and thus no further need to modify the current list of themes. Once the researcher feels satisfied that saturation has occurred, the existing data collection corresponds to what Figure 1 labeled “settled beliefs,” which represent a potentially stable set of results.

At this point, a proposed statement of themes is produced and converted to a codebook. As always, this involves a pragmatic process of moving back and forth between belief and action, where this initial codebook captures beliefs that evolved during the earlier research activities. In particular, ITI treats this first version of the codebook as a way to capture the large amount of analytic work that has already been accomplished by this point.

In some cases, the initial codebook will still contain a larger number of candidate themes than is ultimately desirable. Again, it is usually preferable to maintain the full set, and evaluate their effectiveness during the next phase, rather than deleting some of them prematurely. In particular, the use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Analysis Software (CAQDAS), makes it easier to combine codes at a later phase, as opposed to creating and applying new codes after most of the data has been coded.

#### **Phase Four: Evaluating Themes Through Coding**

This phase of ITI corresponds to the coding process in more traditional approaches, but evaluating themes departs from the idea that coding itself is the centerpiece of the analysis process. Here, the coding process does not generate the themes. Instead, the themes are developed throughout the data collection process, and then systematically assessed against the existing data. In ITI, the coding system is *inductively* generated from the earlier analysis phases, and then *deductively* applied at this point.

In ITI, the actual activity of coding is a straightforward application of the codebook to the data. This is where CAQDAS comes into play. However, rather than using CAQDAS to mark a large number of more descriptive codes and then aggregate them into larger conceptual categories, it matches the existing thematic framework to the data. This raises a question of how many codes are needed, just as there was an earlier question about how many themes to use. In general, each theme, along with its associated memos, is likely to generate several codes that capture the different aspects of that theme. This typically takes the form of dividing more complex themes into sub-themes that also require their own coding categories, and most CAQDAS programs are well suited to the hierarchical organization. *As a guideline, if there are three to five major*

*themes, and five or six codes per theme, this leads to a broad suggestion of 15–30 codes.*

The core issue at this point is whether the codebook indeed accounts for the data. As each segment of the data is examined, its status with regard to the conceptual framework needs to be considered. One potential problem is that the researcher’s conceptualizing has outpaced the data, so that there is little support for some aspects of the codebook. If so, there will be thematic concepts in the codebook that do not play an important role in the data, leading to their deletion from the ultimate summary of the results. The opposite problem is when major elements of the data are not captured by the coding system. In this case, there will be important thematic material that does not fit into the codebook, and thus need to be added to the results. Either of these problems implies not just a revision of the codebook, but also the reworking of the larger thematic summary itself, as well as additional memoing about the work involved in resolving the lack of fit.

The possibility of revision points to the importance of continued memoing during the evaluation phase. The potential for new interpretations has not ended, just because data collection is over. Hence, anything that either strengthens or questions the value of a theme can be the basis for a memo. This need for additional memoing suggests one more use of CAQDAS during the evaluation phase, which is the possibility of coding memos. It should be obvious by now that ITI should generate a rich database of memos, and it may be both more efficient and more effective to manage those memos with CAQDAS rather than a word processor. This matches the analogy of coding as a process for “indexing” the data, where the analyst generates a set of codes that serve as index terms to mark each occurrence of the content associated with that code. Here, the point is to create an index to the memos, so that they too can be evaluated.

Once a final set of themes have been created, they still need to be written up, and moving toward the written account of the research is central to every phase of ITI. In many systems for qualitative analysis, writing up the results is treated as a separate step, but in ITI the first draft of this write-up is produced before data collection begins. That draft of the Results section is continually revised throughout data collection. Once any final revisions are made during the evaluation phase, the remaining writing process is largely technical. The most common task at this point is to add quotations and other supporting material to illustrate how each theme operates in the data. Locating this material can also be done through CAQDAS during the evaluation phase.

#### **ITI as an Alternative to Existing Analysis Methods**

In qualitative research, there is no single approach to the development of themes; hence, this section shows the distinctive aspects of ITI in comparison to three widely used approaches to the analysis of qualitative data: Thematic Analysis (TA), Grounded Theory (GT), and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). Relevant sources include: Braun and Clarke (2006,

**Table 1.** Coding and Memoing in Four Approaches to Qualitative Analysis.

	<b>Iterative Thematic Inquiry</b>	<b>Thematic Analysis</b>	<b>Grounded Theory</b>	<b>Qualitative Content Analysis</b>
<b>Goal in Coding</b>	Check tentative list of themes	Search for patterns	Search for patterns	Search for patterns
<b>Coding Begins</b>	After data analysis	After data collection	During data collection	After data collection
<b>Initial Source of Codes</b>	Can be inductive or deductive	Can be inductive or deductive	Inductive, data driven	Can be inductive or deductive
<b>Memoing</b>	Throughout Data Collection and Analysis	During analysis	Throughout Data Collection and Analysis	During analysis

2019) for TA; Charmaz (2014) and Corbin and Strauss (2014) for GT; and Hseih and Shannon (2005) and Kuckartz (2014) for QCA. Overall, there are two features of Iterative Thematic Inquiry that are particularly noteworthy in comparison to other methods. The first is that the analysis process begins before examining any data. The second is that ITI uses coding as a technique for evaluating a list of tentative themes, rather than as a procedure for generating themes.

Because the first step in ITI is an assessment of existing beliefs and preconceptions, data collection does not start until after completing this initial phase of the analysis. This approach is based on a pragmatic version of inquiry, where beliefs are continually revised through action. ITI thus takes existing beliefs as its starting point, with the goal of continually updating those beliefs through the collection and analysis of new data. As a way to confront preconceptions, this aspect of ITI does not have a parallel in other analysis methods. Instead, the more common approach—as seen in both TA and GT—is to rely on immersion in the data as a way to overcome the influence of prior beliefs, without explicitly basing the analysis on those prior beliefs.

Turning to the place of coding in ITI, it is important to realize that writing, rather than coding, becomes the fundamental procedure in the analysis process. Writing in ITI begins with the summary of preconceptions in the same format as the ultimate Results section, and proceeds through ongoing revisions to that provisional Results section. Consequently, coding in ITI occurs at a late stage in the analysis process when it compares a tentative summary of the writing process to the original data. Table 1 presents several more detailed dimensions for these cross-methods comparisons. As the first row of the table shows, the goal for the coding process presents a strong contrast between ITI and each of other alternate approaches, because it uses coding to evaluate a list of tentative themes instead of using it to search for patterns that will eventually be refined into themes. This follows a pragmatic approach by assessing how well a set of themes fit the data, while each of the other approaches treats coding as a procedure for producing themes or their equivalents.

The timing of coding, as shown in the second row, is another distinctive feature of ITI. This reflects the need for a solid list of codes before they can be applied to the data in ITI's later evaluation phase. Further, although both ITI and GT move back and forth between data collection and data analysis, GT emphasizes coding during data collection as a way to generate thematic categories, which is distinctly different from ITI's use of coding to finalize themes. In contrast, both TA and QCA delay coding until the data collection is complete, and then engage in an iterative process of refining those codes into a final set.

As the third row shows, GT is the only approach to analysis that is purely data driven, although recent versions of TA place more emphasis on inductive sources for codes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In contrast, ITI and QCA offer a choice between either using prior theory to initiate the analysis process deductively or using the data to generate the codebook inductively. Note, however, that because ITI revises its tentative themes during ongoing encounters with the data, this tends to upset the distinction between analyses that are solely inductive or deductive. Instead, ITI specifies that even a deductively generated set of initial themes will be updated inductively before evaluative coding begins.

The final row of the table shows that ITI and GT both employ a memoing process throughout data collection and analysis, whereas TA and QCA put their emphasis on memoing during a separate analysis process. For both ITI and GT, this memoing supports a process of *constant comparison* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) between earlier products of the analysis process and newly encountered data. This role for memoing means that it receives more explicit attention in both ITI and GT than in either TA or QCA. However, the similarity between ITI and GT is not as clear-cut as it might appear, since memoing in ITI begins *before* data collection.

### **An Illustrative Example of ITI: Meaning Reconstruction Among Religious Exiters**

This section presents an empirical example of ITI. The study was based on qualitative interviews with 24 participants who



left or exited Christian fundamentalist religions (Nica, 2018, 2019, 2020). It relied on an application of prior theory to examine how these “exiters” reconstructed their lives. The overall goal was to understand how the reconstruction process within identity, meaning, and social support and relationships affected well-being after exiting.

This illustrative analysis is devoted to one specific element of the original study’s larger theoretical framework: meaning reconstruction and its impact on well-being. The theories used to situate meaning reconstruction and well-being were Pearlin’s (1981, 1989) stress process model and Park’s (2010) meaning-making model. Pearlin’s stress model provided an emphasis on coping mechanisms such as *stress mediators* (e.g., meaning making) that assist individuals in dealing with and attaching meaning to stressful life events (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). The meaning-making model offers a theoretical pathway linking meaning to well-being (Park & Folkman, 1997; Park, 2010). For a religious exiter, meaning making calls for making sense of the discrepancy between a previous meaning system, based on religious beliefs, and a new, reconstructed meaning system. This approach treats the exiting process as a stressful life event, due to the conflict between meanings from the former religious framework and a new set of meanings. Successful meaning making is conceptualized as an important determinant of well-being (Park, 2010).

### First Phase: Assessing Initial Beliefs as Themes

As the first phase of the ITI process, I started by developing an initial outline of my preconceptions and their origins (i.e., previous research/theory, informal interactions, personal experience) as related to meaning reconstruction and well-being. Specifically, I created a draft description of the themes that I expected to find.

The first theme was related to the possible negative impacts of losing a higher purpose and/or common goal, which might also include the missing rituals, practices, traditions, structure, and order cultivated in the religion exited. If an exiter values these aspects of the religious experience, then a positive outcome will depend on reconstructing this aspect of meaning. Alternatively, exiters who do not believe that these features of meaning matter will not experience a significant impact on well-being.

The second theme I derived from prior theory and literature involved an increased sense of morality rooted in individuality and critical thinking skills which would enhance well-being. The third theme included the loss of existential certainty and security fostered in the religion left. The last expected theme was that exiters would experience a crisis due to losing their meaning making framework after leaving religion and would benefit from undergoing a meaning-making process to achieve a new resolution. If an exiter successfully made sense of their experience, that would contribute positively to well-being, and if they did not make sense of their experience, that would lead to decreased well-being (with the possibility of an intermediate experience, with both positive and negative impacts on well-

being). The primary gain would come from an explicit, positive resolution to meaning making concerns.

### Second Phase: Building New Beliefs During Data Collection

In phase two of ITI, I developed a series of post-preconception write-ups throughout the data collection. Both reflective memos and methodological memos after each semi-structured interview began to reveal emerging insights regarding the meaning reconstruction pathways for exiters in this study. Theoretical limitations to the thematic preconceptions of phase one of ITI also began to emerge. Namely, meaning-making attempts, as outlined in the meaning-making model, did not closely align with the meaning-making issues described by exiters.

As an alternative, I developed a set of four new themes related to meaning reconstruction. First, *Meaning Structure* pointed to the need for and pursuit of social cohesion, common purpose, and sense of community. Second, *Meaning Orientation* included a nonreligious perspective, increased empathy, critical thinking, interest in social justice issues and a personal morality no longer attached to a religious deity. *Meaning Security* involved increased personal liberation, freedom, independence, and autonomy. Finally, *Meaning Outcome* consisted of a positive, mixed, or negative resolution for exiters in this study.

Meaning Structure is a newly emergent theme that arose from some exiters experiencing a sense of loss of structure, shared purpose, and a higher significance. Meaning Orientation is a revised theme, which was derived from my original preconceptions about meaning security, as new subthemes emerged concerning increased interest in social justice issues, empathy for the human condition, and an individualized morality no longer attached to a religious deity. Meaning Security, in a more limited sense, is carried over from the original set in demonstrating how exiters feel a greater sense of personal freedom, individuality and autonomy in nonreligion, after experiencing a loss of existential security and certainty from the religious belief system. Lastly, Meaning Outcome is revised from preconceptions that if exiters reported a positive resolution, which most did, then it contributed to enhanced well-being. Beyond those positive outcomes, some exiters expressed a mixture of positive and negative impacts on wellbeing, with positive outcomes linked to exiters making sense of their stressful life event to a satisfactory degree.

With regard to the first revised theme, Meaning Structure, Cameron, a former Seventh-day Adventist, mentioned his feelings regarding sense of community:

... it was nice having that consistent kind of regimented, required, but still social moments—be it church service, be it prayer meeting, be it the Pathfinders [religious activity]. That had benefits as any kind of social gathering or construct can be beneficial for the purposes under the header of the Christ journey... Though I’m part of groups, they’re not about spiritual progression...

Cameron went on to share how a reconstructed meaning with a different structure might look like:

I'm kind of looking at ways to connect with people now, though I haven't really found anything yet . . . other than the one-on-ones that I mentioned where I've had friends that were progressive and/or free thinker—but not in terms of meeting with a group of people that felt that way . . . that's something I'm pursuing and one thing that was nice about being in a religion was the social piece, under the header of spiritual journey . . . but I don't even know what it would look like in terms of a group of free thinkers . . . I would enjoy that.

This participant was not alone in highlighting the importance of Meaning Structure, by discussing the difficulty of finding a social group under the heading of “spiritual progression,” while also wondering about liberal spiritual communities that might resemble features too close to the religion they left. More specifically, although exiters no longer aligned with the religious ideology and belief system after leaving the religion, some participants missed having a meaning-making community that focused on a shared common goal linked to a higher emotional significance. So, properties such as social cohesion, participation, commitment, and a sense of community were missed, but, *not* the religious ideology linked to the meaning structure that pervaded those relationships.

Turning to the second theme of Meaning Orientation (which involved acquiring a nonreligious perspective, increased empathy, critical thinking, interest in social justice issues and a personal morality no longer attached to a religious deity), Tina, a former Evangelical, expressed how an atheist orientation shaped her worldview more broadly:

I think . . . being more open to everything in life really. I think sometimes when you come from a specific religious background, you're close minded to other things or other people's ideas . . . the other thing is just being more reconciled in bad things that can happen. I left the church and kind of became more of an atheist before I became a nurse and I feel like I've always been happier that I did that because you see some patients . . . that are really old that just never took care of their bodies and they're still alive and well and here's someone, 24 [years old], and they're going to die in three months. I think things like that are easier for me to reconcile now that I don't have a specific religion.

In this way, participants found mental strategies for making sense of their exit by taking on a nonreligious orientation that contributed to enhanced empathy, critical thinking, and a personal morality, as well as an increased interest in social justice and secular-oriented affairs.

With regard to the third theme of Meaning Security (including increased personal liberation, freedom, independence, and autonomy), Victoria, an ex-Jehovah's Witnesses shared:

I think the freedoms. Freedom to dress how I want. Freedom to do things like celebrate holidays, vote. Freedom to have an opinion. Freedom to view myself as an equal as a woman, especially in a relationship. Freedom of thinking. Freedom of information.

Freedom of emotion. Freedom of behaviors. It's like I get to decide what's okay and what's not okay for me, versus turning that over to somebody else to decide for you.

As Victoria noted, this form of freedom is personally grounded in that exiters feel more enabled to make decisions on how to think, act, and feel, rather than adhere to a prescribed set of rules that, for many, involves excluding individuals and ideologies that do not align with that of the religious group.

Moving on to the last theme related to meaning reconstruction—Meaning Outcome—most exiters reported a positive resolution in exiting the religion. However, some highlighted instances of a mixed outcome (i.e., positive and negative), which are worthy to note. Adam, former Mormon, shared:

I think when I was first becoming an atheist I thought, “Okay, well I'll deal with these existential questions and have them resolved” but found that it's not an easy resolution. It's sort of like staying in shape. You have to keep working at it and the fact that we're eventually going to die is still troubling and it still bothers me. It still makes me afraid for death and things like that and I don't think it's something that can be easily resolved. I think it's something that has to be lived with and dealt with in a real day-to-day way that takes a higher amount of mental energy.

Working within this reconstructed meaning-making framework, the participant also mentioned becoming more comfortable with searching for answers, while also being comfortable with not having all the answers—contrast to what was common in a religious meaning-making framework.

For many exiters, meaning reconstruction (and its components) is a process and, while it may be challenging in the initial stages of the exit, many participants found their decision to exit a positive one. Diane, an ex-Evangelical, conveyed this best:

Now, I would call it definitely positive. But if you had talked to me a year after I left, it would have been—I would have been resolute because obviously I finished—I'm still doing it—but I would have called it painful and negative but necessary. That's what I would have described it as—painful, negative, and necessary. Now, I wish I had left 15 years earlier.

Similarly, Victoria, ex-Jehovah's Witnesses, made the following remark linked to her reported positive resolution in exiting the religion, “My worst day being out of the church, is far better than my best day being in the church.”

### *Third and Fourth Phases of ITI*

In the third phase of ITI, listing tentative themes, a coding system was derived from the revised set of themes developed in phase two. This list was then applied in the fourth phase, evaluating themes through coding. This last step involved generating codes for meaning reconstruction and its components related to well-being. The specific items in the codebook included: gains, losses, and ongoing strains and stressors across meaning making (security, orientation, structure), as well as

meaning outcome (positive, negative, mixed). In the fourth and final step, these codes were used to mark the corresponding segments of the transcribed interviews. This coding was also used to interpret how well the codes accounted for the key elements in each interview. Thereafter, the final Results section based on the evaluation from this step was developed.

### Closing Remarks on the Study

Substantively, exiters who reported a positive resolution in leaving the religion, who were the majority, also reported increased well-being. Conversely, those who reported a mixed outcome tended to have a less fully achieved sense of the exit and were still in the meaning reconstruction process (i.e., undergoing meaning-making attempts). However, this meaning-making process depended on different insights from what I originally expected, which called for an alternative framework. That is, based on the emergent insights I gained from participants' narratives, I identified limits in the fit with the original theoretical models (i.e., stress process and meaning-making models), which led to a reconceptualization of the themes for the reconstruction of meaning related to well-being.

### Conclusions

In recent years, thematic development (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2016) has moved beyond being an implicit basis for generating the results of qualitative research to becoming one of the central methods for qualitative analysis. The method presented here, Iterative Thematic Inquiry, provides a fresh approach by focusing on themes from the very beginning of a research project and continuing throughout. At the earliest stages, themes are a tool for confronting the researcher's preconceptions, and they continue to serve as a format for stating the results.

ITI is just as innovative in its approach to the coding process. Because themes are the organizing principle throughout ITI, there is no need to wait until the end of the analysis to search for themes. Instead, the statement of themes is what starts the analysis, and revising them is what drives further analytic activities. Hence, writing, rather than coding, is what produces the results in ITI.

Ultimately, any report of research must provide an account of the data, and that account must be about something meaningful. In qualitative research, themes have become a fundamental mechanism for expressing that "something." Seen in this light, Iterative Thematic Inquiry uses the concept of theme as both the essential mechanism for developing research results and a vital means for communicating those results.


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