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# Clarifying Common Misconceptions About Thematic Analysis

## My Background

- I am a professor of education at the University of Southern Mississippi.

- I received my doctorate in Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education from Rutgers University.

- Much of his research focuses on how various factors related to the learning environment affect students.

## Research Topic & Why It is Important

- Two of my articles were published in *The Qualitative Report.*

- One of these focuses on some common misconceptions about thematic analysis.

- One of the reasons this topic is important is that having misconceptions about TA can lead researchers to produce poorly designed studies.

# Research Topic & Why It is Important

- Thematic analysis (TA) frequently confuses researchers because different versions of this method exist (Clarke & Braun, 2018).

- Researchers may be unsure of the version of TA that is most suitable for fulfilling the goals of their studies and the problems associated with combining different versions of this method (Braun et al., 2019).

- Combining elements of different versions of TA can result in publishing papers without recognizing the conceptual clashes between different approaches (Braun et al., 2019).

# Research Topic & Why It is Important

- Having the skills to conduct a TA is crucial for anyone interested in participating in qualitative research.

- Although qualitative approaches are extremely diverse, developing themes is a component of many types of qualitative studies.

# Research Topic & Why It is Important



Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun

- For these reasons, TA has been viewed as a foundational method that should be the first one a qualitative researcher needs to learn (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

# Methodology

- To write this paper, I relied on a purposeful sample of literature written by reputable authors who published papers and books containing information about this topic.

- I then analyzed this content to write a conceptual paper designed to enhance the understanding of different versions of thematic analysis and to document the controversies associated with each type.
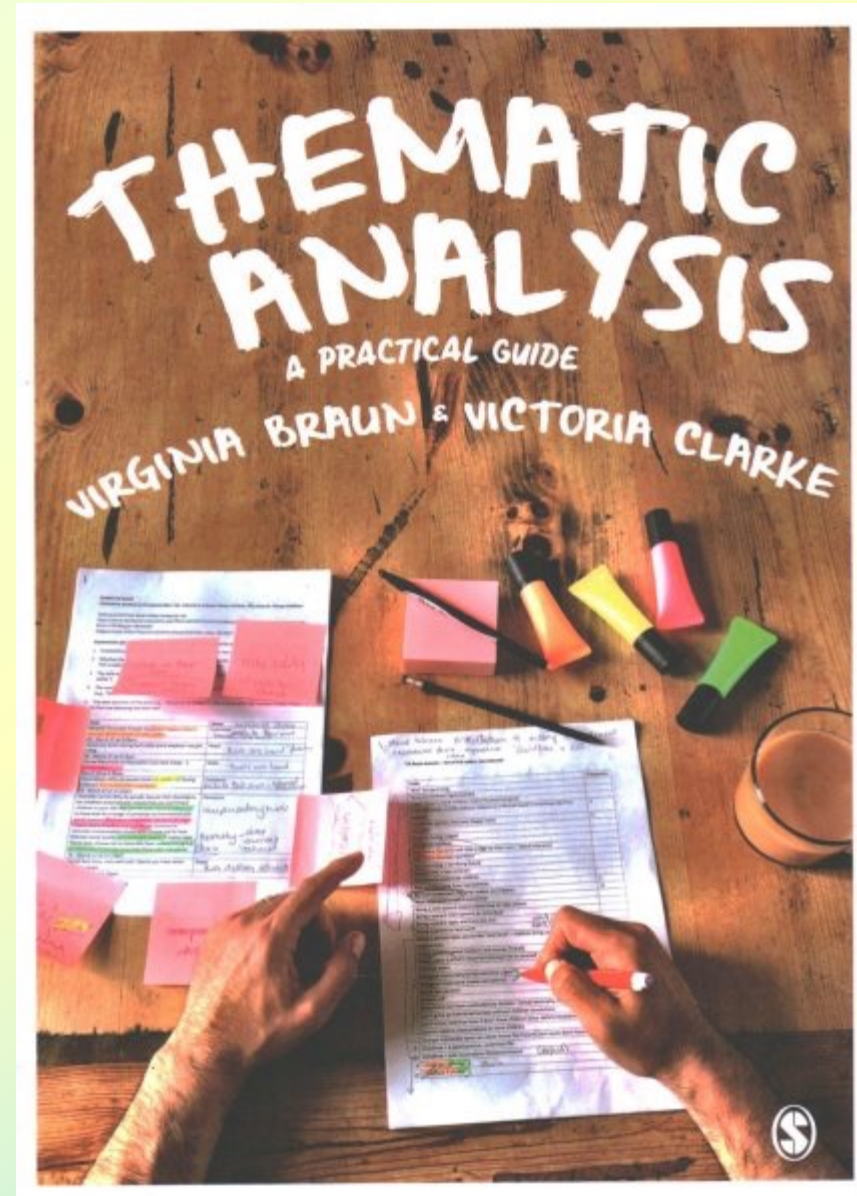
# Historical Overview of TA

- Thematic analysis likely evolved from content analysis, a historically quantitative method (Joffe, 2012).

- The first presentation of a methodological approach using the term "content analysis" was a text titled *The Analysis of Communication Content*.

- It was authored by Berelson and Lazarsfeld and appeared in 1948 (Krippendorff, 2019).

- This text was later published in 1952 as *Content Analysis in Communication Research*.

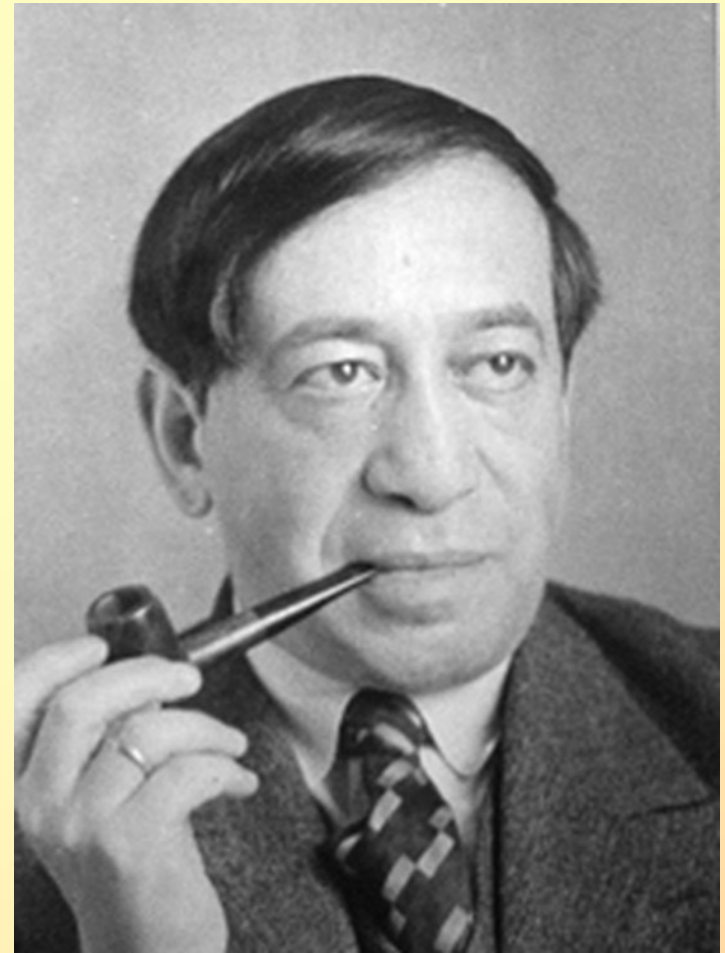# Historical Overview of TA

In this book, Berelson indicated that content analysis is a systematic and objective method for quantitative description (Schreier, 2014).



Bernard Berelson

## Historical Overview of TA

- In the same year his book was published, his approach was challenged.

- Kracauer (1952) objected to Berelson's narrow view, pointing out that meaning is not always apparent at first sight and is frequently holistic, complex, and context dependent.

- He was also opposed to the practice, often used in quantitative studies, of associating the importance of a theme with its coding frequency.

Siegfried Kracauer

# Historical Overview of TA

- Although TA likely developed from content analysis, understanding precisely how it evolved is difficult to determine because it was applied in diverse ways before Berelson published his work (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

- During the 1930s, musicologists used the term "thematic analysis" to describe a specific kind of analysis of musical scores.

- The term was also used in the 1940s when sociologists referred to a technique to analyze mass propaganda.

-  In the 1940s and 1950s, psychoanalysts used the term as well (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

**Modern Versions of TA**

- Modern versions of TA have been classified based on the extent to which each one requires the use of qualitative methods (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

- Braun et al. (2019) identified three broad schools of TA and mentioned that each one is associated with more than one way of conducting this type of analysis.

- The first school is associated with a reflexive approach, the second with a coding reliability approach, and the third with a codebook approach.

# Paradigms Associated with Qualitative and Quantitative Research

- Instead of using an approach consistent with post-positivism, many qualitative researchers rely on methods associated with an interpretive tradition.
- Researchers who use interpretive approaches focus on how people make meaning of phenomena rather than answer questions about the objective reality of the world.

# Paradigms Associated with Qualitative and Quantitative Research

## Interpretive Paradigm

The world cannot be known independent of the mind.

Emphasis is on understanding human behavior.

Focus is on people's interpretation of the world.

Subjectivity is considered valuable.

Emphasis is on how the world is socially constructed.

## Post-Positivist Paradigm

The natural world can be measured to a certain degree of accuracy.

Emphasis is on making meaning through measurements and experiments.

Data is reduced to numbers.

Objectivity is considered valuable.

Research is based on a deductive approach that emphasizes theory testing.

# The Reflexive Approach

- Of the three schools, the only one associated with a fully qualitative paradigm is the reflexive approach.

- This approach differs from the other two regarding how the coding process is implemented and how the themes are conceptualized.

- When a fully qualitative approach is used, subjectivity is viewed as an advantage rather than something that needs to be avoided (Braun et al., 2019).

- And the coding process is not determined before a researcher examines the data. Instead, it is frequently implemented with an inductive approach (Terry et al., 2017).
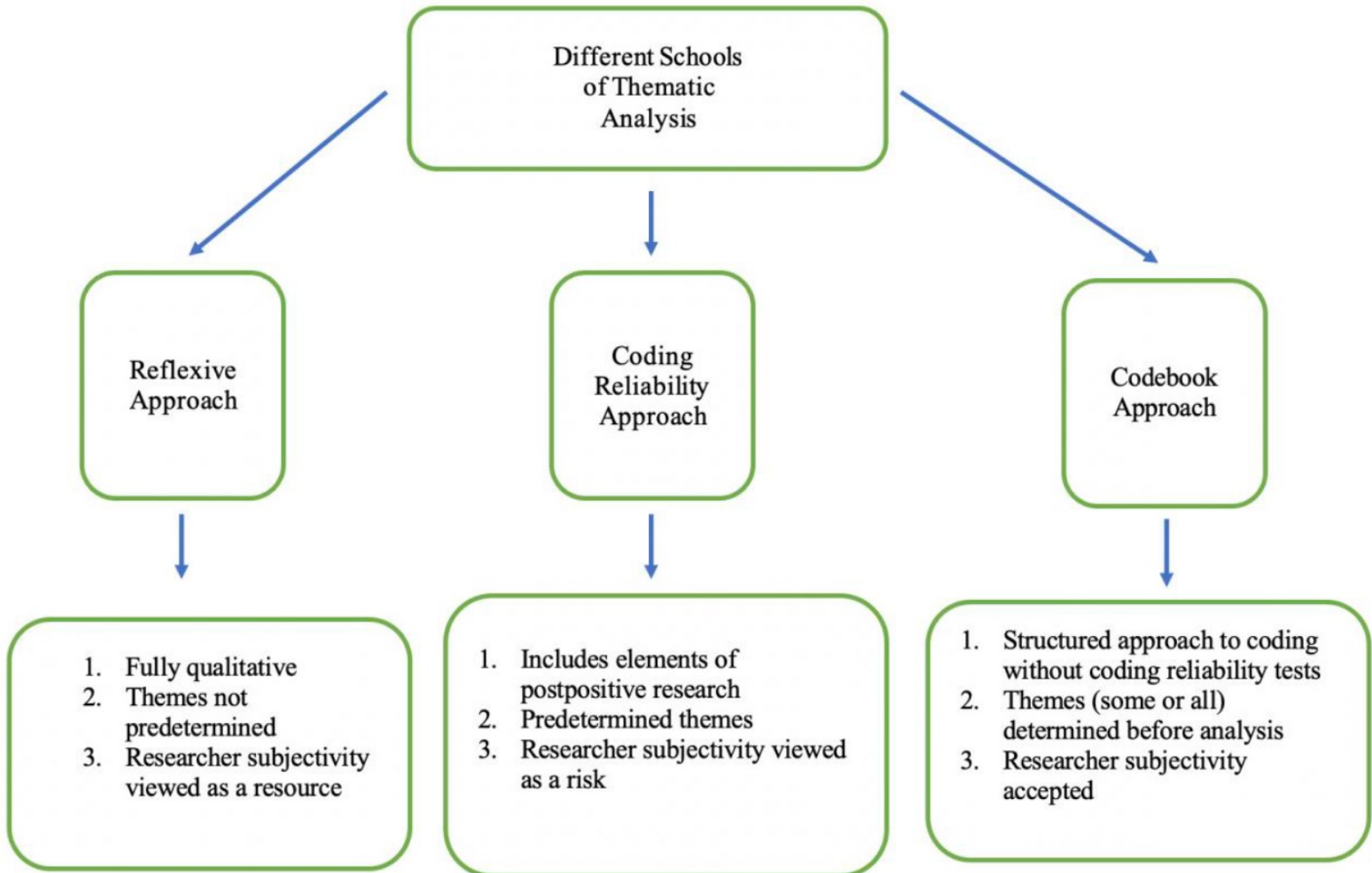
# The Coding Reliability Approach

- Unlike the reflexive approach, the coding reliability approach includes aspects of a postpositivist paradigm because it is based on the positivist conception of reliability (Terry et al., 2017).

- This approach typically requires multiple coders to agree on how the codes need to be applied to accurately analyze the data.

- Two or more coders need to reach a level of agreement at or above a certain score (often 0.80) for them to be considered reliable coders (Braun et al., 2019).

- Such an approach is consistent with a postpositivist paradigm because it is designed to reduce researcher bias and produce reliable and objective results (Terry et al., 2017).

# The Codebook Approach

- The codebook approach is somewhat like the coding reliability approach because it involves a structured approach to coding. But it differs in that coding reliability is often not established (Braun et al., 2019).

- The codebook approach is similar to the reflexive approach in that researcher subjectivity is valued.

- Thus, it falls somewhere between the coding reliability approach and the reflexive approach regarding the extent to which it is based on a qualitative paradigm (Braun et al., 2019).

# Differences Between the Three Schools of TA

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                    │  Different Schools   │
                    │  of Thematic         │
                    │  Analysis            │
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**Reflexive Approach**

**Coding Reliability Approach**

**Codebook Approach**

**Reflexive Approach**
1. Fully qualitative
2. Themes not predetermined
3. Researcher subjectivity viewed as a resource

**Coding Reliability Approach**
1. Includes elements of postpositive research
2. Predetermined themes
3. Researcher subjectivity viewed as a risk

**Codebook Approach**
1. Structured approach to coding without coding reliability tests
2. Themes (some or all) determined before analysis
3. Researcher subjectivity accepted

# Controversies Involving the Different Types of TA



- Researchers need to be aware of the kinds of criticisms they may face for selecting a certain version of TA so that they can make wise decisions on which approach to use.

- One decision they need to make is whether to choose a fully qualitative or a mixed methods approach.

# Objections to Using Mixed Methods Approaches to TA

- Combining aspects of quantitative and qualitative methods together can lead to problems.

- The number of participants mentioning a theme does not indicate whether it is valid.

- This method does not work for qualitative studies because deciding on the number of participants who need to express a perspective for it to be valid is impossible (Pyett, 2003).

- The numerical measurement of agreement between coders, often implemented to achieve objectivity before an analysis, has been viewed as a controversial practice as well (O'Conner & Joffe, 2020).

# Objections to Using Mixed Methods Approaches to TA

- Scholars argue that one of the researchers can influence the others to examine text fragments the way she or he does, leading all the coders to have the same subjective views (Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

- Many qualitative scholars view their area of research as a field comprised of many perspectival realities and do not believe that their role is to search for universal objective facts but to interpret varied perspectives using their expertise (O'Conner & Joffe, 2020).

# Arguments in Favor of Using Mixed Methods Approaches to TA

- Some researchers believe the use of ICR can enhance some qualitative studies.

- Achieving high ICR can convince an audience that the members of a research team have an accurate understanding of the coding frame used for a given study.

- In some cases, qualitative studies need to be conducted with more than one person.

- For cross-cultural studies involving the collection of data in many languages, a team of researchers may be needed to analyze the data.

- ICR can enhance qualitative research by creating chances for a group of researchers to make the same judgements that one researcher would when she or he cannot work alone.

# Conclusion

- Thematic analysis is a foundational component of qualitative research.

- Therefore, this method should be one of the first that qualitative researchers learn.

- To understand how to use this method well, researchers need to be aware that it can be implemented in different ways.

- One aspect of TA they need to understand is that each version of this method is associated with controversies.

# Conclusion

- Mixed methods approaches are often criticized because they can distort qualitative data.

- And well-designed, fully qualitative research is sometimes criticized for being subjective.

- But this view is debatable because qualitative researchers support their interpretations with evidence consisting of the quotations they include in their reports.