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Chapter

Thematic Analysis in Social Work: A Case Study

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Abstract

The article aims to provide a step-by-step description of how thematic analysis was applied in a study examining why men choose to undertake social work as an area of study. Participants in the study came from the University of Concepción in Chile and the University of Quebec in Abitibi-Témiscamingue in Canada. The six phases of the thematic analysis are described in detail to provide students and novice social work researchers with a guide to this method of analysis. Thematic analysis offers a flexible, yet rigorous approach to subjective experience that is highly applicable to research in social work as a means of promoting social justice and combating inequalities.

Keywords: thematic analysis, social work, qualitative research

1. Introduction

There exist few detailed guidelines for thematic analysis, which represents a gap in the scientific literature. This article aims to partially remedy this scarcity by examining thematic analysis methods, drawing on the authors' experiences as social work researchers, particularly as pertains to a case study. The present study is a six-step guide addressed specifically to students and novice researchers.

Thematic analysis has gained increasing currency in various branches of social work research, such as qualitative analysis [1–3], aboriginal research [4], resilience studies [5], the practice of social work in healthcare [6–8], and minors [9, 10]. Nevertheless, little has been written on the specific adaptations and modulations that thematic analysis requires for use in social work research if it is to reflect the field's specific preoccupations. It is important to note from the outset that thematic analysis in qualitative research is an empirical inductive approach to collect data.

The particular importance of qualitative research methods, such as thematic analysis, for social work is that these approaches can also serve to promote social justice and combat inequalities. Qualitative methods allow researchers to transmit people's ideas, perceptions, and opinions by analyzing and disseminating participant discourses. This "speech act" is based on the values that guide social work, namely, respect for personal and collective rights, as well as a recognition of the need to perceive and understand human beings as constituents of an interdependent system that carries the potential for change. In employing qualitative research methods, social work researchers have a responsibility to promote social change and contribute to resolve social problems by analyzing and disseminating collected testimonies, which also serve as a basis from which to formulate future research and intervention paths. No other research methods have the same capacity to give voice to the disenfranchised in order to foster social change.

In order to contextualize the discussion of thematic analysis, the following section will first explore the broader framework of qualitative research. Why is qualitative research well suited to social work? After examining potential answers to this question, the discussion will then proceed to its core subject: thematic analysis and its usefulness in social work research, demonstrated by specific examples from fieldwork. This constitutes the primary aim of the present article.

2. Qualitative research and its relevance for social work

Qualitative methods are an established component of research models in various branches of inquiry, including social work, and have been used by social work researchers studying a range of dimensions, such as the family [11–14], women [15–17], children [18–21], and mental health services [18, 22–24]. Thus, qualitative research methods have served to develop various domains of social work intervention (**Table 1**).

Over the past three decades, many authors have proposed varying definitions of qualitative research. **Table 2** shows the major components of those definitions, providing clues as to the fundamental elements of the "DNA" of qualitative research and their relevance for social work.

Characteristics	Relevance for social work
1. Naturalist, interpretative view of reality	Insofar as qualitative research cannot be said to produce generalizable results of the same order of quantitative methods, it does, however, conform to the principle of generalizability: social work researchers use data to infer conclusions without extrapolating universal principles.
2. Objective proximity to the subjective reality under study	The epistemological approach and data collection methods of qualitative research bring social work researchers into contact with the sphere of individuals' emotions and representations; this is the sphere in which the professional practice of social work happens.
3. Holistic approach to the reality under study	Qualitative research takes into consideration the lived aspects of individuals' social, political, historical, and cultural lives; subjects are not studied in isolation from their reality.
4. Empirical inductive reasoning	Using qualitative research, social work researchers do not operate based on predefined categories of analysis: it is the application of qualitative research methods to collect data that produce hypotheses.
5. Flexibility in employing various research techniques	Qualitative research involves techniques taught in social work programs, including participant observation, varied interview methods, source analysis, and literature review.
6. Importance of actors and their experiences	Qualitative methods allow researchers to "give voice to the voiceless," a fundamental value in social work, in view of the principle that understanding a phenomenon requires acknowledging individuals' viewpoints, discourses, and histories. Social work deals with human individuals, not objects of study.
7. The social work researcher as "measuring instrument"	Social work researchers must adopt a rigorous approach to limit the impact of their subjectivity on their interpretation of data; they must filter data, without distorting its significations.

Source: Deslauriers [25]; Guba [26]; Hatch [27]; Hernández Sampieri et al. [28]; Marshall and Rossman [29]; Morse and Richards [30].

Table 1.
Characteristics of qualitative research.

Criteria
1. Questions are designed to discover, explore, and understand a little-studied phenomenon, as well as the meanings of its experience in the lives of individuals.
2. Little information is available on the variables of a phenomenon, and they are impossible to measure.
3. The subject requires a comprehensive and detailed approach.
4. The goal is to restore people's agency or mitigate the power relations that may arise between researchers and study participants [31].
5. Existing theoretical frameworks are fragmentary or inadequate to frame the phenomenon in its complexity.
6. Quantitative analysis cannot account for the effects of variables (race gender, etc.) on the human interactions under study [31].
7. The study aims to describe or examine the perspective of the actors experiencing a phenomenon.

Table 2.
Qualitative research criteria.

3. Applications of qualitative research

The elaboration of a research protocol or project requires asking whether qualitative research is relevant to the study's methods and goals. The choice to adopt a qualitative approach is generally based on at least one of the criteria presented in **Table 3**.

These seven elements represent contexts in which qualitative research is apposite. In order to demonstrate the application of these elements in fieldwork, **Table 3** presents examples of questions used by the authors in previous qualitative studies.

Qualitative research includes a range of analytical methods applicable in various contexts. Those that appear to be adopted most often include phenomenographic analysis, phenomenological analysis, grounded theory (GT), case studies [32], narrative analysis [31], content analysis [33–35], participatory action research [36–38], aboriginal research [39–41], discourse analysis [42–45], and systematic analysis [46, 47].

Level	Core question	Question types
Explore, name, discover, or understand	What is? What are?	What affection do adult adopted children show toward their birth parents? What are the secondary effects of triple combination therapy on people over the age of 60 living with HIV/AIDS? What are the characteristics of professional burnout among health care workers in rural contexts?
Experience	What are the meanings, representations, and perceptions?	What does it mean for parents to have a child infected by HIV? What are the social representations of HIV/AIDS expressed by men who have sexual relations with other men? What are high school students' perceptions of online bullying?

Table 3.
Research questions typology.

4. Defining thematic analysis

The definition of thematic analysis adopted in the present paper is that of a method that allows researchers to identify and organize relevant themes and sub-themes, which can then be used as units of analysis [48, 49] in subsequent detailed re-readings of a data set [50], through which researchers increasingly familiarize themselves with the data and explore the meanings associated with the concepts emerging from participant testimonies [51, 52]. The central operation of thematic analysis, therefore, is thematization [53]. It is important to specify that "data set" refers to all materials compiled within the scope of a given study: transcripts of interviews conducted with participants, written testimonies, verbal communications, study objectives, and research questions, as well as all other relevant materials, which can include newspaper articles, annual research reports, and social work intervention reports, among others.

Repeated readings of a data set are necessary for the identification of the most salient significations in the collected materials. It is through these processes that researchers can reveal the affective, cognitive, and symbolic dimensions of the assembled data.

Social work research should seek to address issues of social justice and inequality or, at the very least, should not contribute to deficit constructions of marginalized populations by failing to acknowledge issues of discrimination and oppression.

5. The phases of thematic analysis

Thematic analysis involves six phases (see **Figure 1**). For the purposes of the present discussion, these phases will be described using examples from the authors' experiences during a previous study, in which one of the main research themes was the reasons why certain men choose professions socially viewed as feminine [54]. The study involved 26 male participants enrolled in social work university programs: 13 in Chile and 13 in the Canadian province of Québec. The research question was exploratory, since no previous studies had addressed the issue directly; the thematic analysis, therefore, required a high degree of interpretation to fully grasp the significations emerging from participant testimonies. Specifically, the research question sought to discover the motivations, obstacles, and positive reference points, which characterized men's interest in social work, a profession socially viewed as feminine. The following extensive discussion will refer to examples from the aforementioned study in order to examine in detail the methodological progression of the six phases of thematic analysis.

It is essential to note that the six phases presented in **Figure 2** overlap and interact: the phases are not exclusively successive, since there is a measure of recursion involved, in what is nevertheless a generally linear process. These characteristics indicate that thematic analysis is a flexible yet rigorous method of data analysis (see **Figure 1**). Three distinct approaches may be applied to thematic analysis: deductive (when themes are defined at the outset, prior to analyses), inductive (when themes emerge in the course of analysis), or, frequently, a deductive-inductive combination.

5.1 Phase 1: Familiarization with collected data

The first phase begins with the task of transcribing audio recordings of individual or group interviews carried out in the course of the study. The next step involves proceeding through initial readings of the transcripts in order to find the most salient significations in the participants' testimonies. The material must be read thoroughly, attentively and analytically, particularly in order to identify those
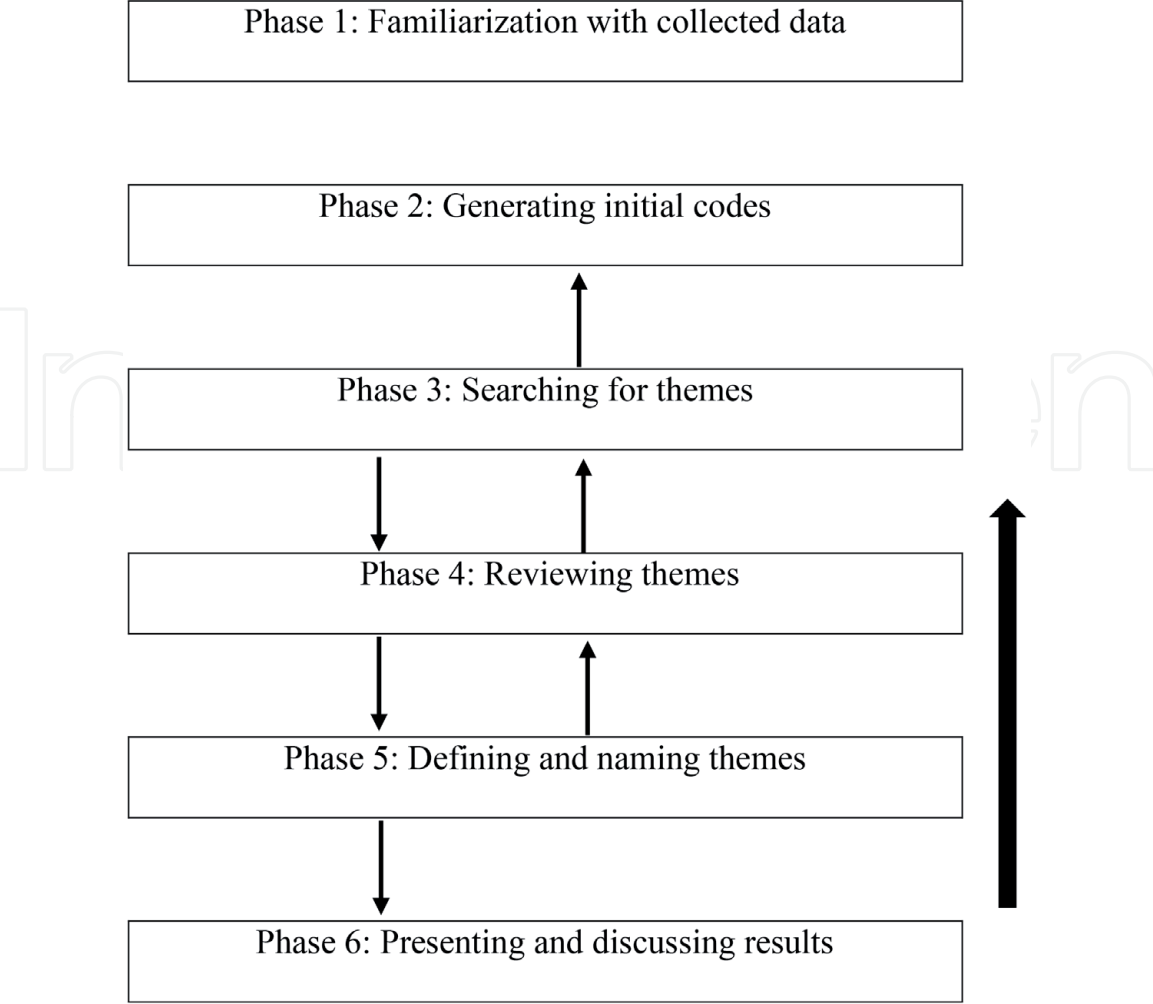
Phase 1: Familiarization with collected data

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Phase 3: Searching for themes

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Phase 6: Presenting and discussing results

Figure 1.
Thematic analysis: Six interactive phases.

elements that may at first seem banal, yet frequently crucial to understanding the significations of a participants' discourse.

Several techniques can help researchers to structure their first readings of the material. For example, an initial coding chart allows for the clear identification of excerpts that appear immediately relevant. As well, researchers familiar with thematic analysis frequently make annotations in the margins of transcripts or highlight in color certain excerpts that appear to be particularly significant.

The following excerpt and the comments cited below illustrate one researcher's initial observations following a first reading of material collected in the course of a study:

Q: Which factors influenced your career choice?

A: I have a childhood friend who is a SW [social worker] and I went to talk with him. He told me about the main orientations of the profession, and I took the decision to enter this line of work. So it was the advice of a friend that helped me to make my decision to undertake social work, which I had not really thought about when I was in high school. It came from these conversations with this friend about the program, and I feel that I do not regret this decision. (Chilean participant No. 8, page 54)

Primary themes ➡ **Codes** ➡ **Excerpts of testimonies**
(see Table 3)

Figure 2.
Presentation of results.

The meanings identified in the testimony of Participant No. 8 were that: **a)** the participant had a close relationship with a social worker who influenced his career choice; **b)** the participant wanted to learn about the profession before deciding to undertake it; **c)** the profession's orientations attracted the participant; **d)** the participant had not chosen a career path upon completing his secondary education; and **e)** the participant was satisfied with his choice of studies.

The example demonstrates that even a short interview excerpt can be a rich source of information, in this case indicating the various factors that characterized and influenced the participant's choice to study toward a career in social work.

It is worth noting that qualitative data software, such as Nvivo®, presents additional coding capabilities and is in widespread use. For the purposes of the present study, however, the researchers opted to employ a manual coding technique.

In summary, the first phase of thematic analysis involves several steps and techniques:

- Listening to and transcribing participant interviews.

- Before undertaking readings of the material, it is helpful to construct an initial coding chart on which researchers can record their first impressions of the readings; this coding chart may identify the participant's pseudonym, the specific excerpt in question, the transcript page number, and the signification or observation noted.

- It is useful, as well, to keep the study objectives physically visible or close at hand for quick reference; this is especially recommended if the researcher carrying out the thematic analysis did not personally carry out the interviews or did not participate in the elaboration of the research project.

- Initial readings of the material should be carried out repetitively, without at first overly focusing on particular details, in order to develop a familiarity with the raw data collected from participants. Examples of questions to keep in my mind during these first readings include:

    ○ *What is this person trying to say?*

    ○ *Why are they talking about that in this particular way?*

    ○ *How should I interpret what I am reading?*

- In order to maintain familiarity with the raw data, repeated readings must be carried out in close succession, which contributes to a fuller understanding of participant testimonies and their significations. Researchers must keep in mind that they are scrutinizing the data for any and all information that relates to the research question and study objectives.

- During these surface readings of the data set, researchers should use the initial coding chart to note any emerging elements that seem unfamiliar, interesting, or specifically related to the study question and objectives.

- It is possible that following a few initial readings, researchers will be able to identify certain elements of data as themes (normally, this operation is not carried out until Phase 3). It is advisable in these instances to proceed cautiously,

noting all pertinent elements on the coding chart and continuing to progress through the readings while noting elements that appear related to the theme, but refraining from premature definition.

Within a constructivist perspective, in the first phase of thematic analysis, the researcher adopts a subjectivist epistemological approach the reality under study. In the course of this process, researcher and respondent become a mutually constructed unit. The results, therefore, are the products of interactions between their realities ([26] in [55]:p. 17). In this process of production, social work researchers must maintain consciously reflexive, in order to minimize the potential effects of their prejudices or opinions, which could otherwise deform or falsify interpretation.

It is always preferable that the researcher carrying out the readings be the same person that carried out interviews with participants; this will place the researcher in a better epistemological position to ensure continuity throughout the thematic analysis process. If someone else is tasked with carrying out the readings, it is imperative that they become highly familiar with all aspects of the research project before beginning their analyses.

5.2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes

In this second phase, the researcher will use information identified as relevant in Phase 1 to generate initial codes. At the outset, researchers begin grouping elements of data according to similarities or perceived patterns: these are initial codes (see **Tables 4** and **5**). This ordering of the data is necessary to develop a comprehensive perspective on the participants' latent or semantic discourse. An experienced researcher will likely proceed more quickly through this process; indeed, some researchers frequently combine the first two phases of thematic analysis.

To begin, a code is a type of raw data extracted from interviews and field notes. These include words or phrases that are representative of groups or patterns of data (see **Table 4**). Miles and Huberman [56] identify three types of codes. The first is descriptive codes, which require very little interpretation. The second is interpretive codes, which represent data that require a certain depth of interpretation in order to be fully understood. The third type is inferential codes, relating to data that are explicative and indicate causal relationships.

Within the classification elaborated by Miles and Huberman [56], therefore, the examples presented in this article largely correspond to the descriptive type. When

Research objective No. 1	Codes (Level 1)	Excerpts of testimonies
Describe the motivations of men who choose to pursue studies in a profession socially viewed as feminine.	Vocation. I wanted to work with people and to help. Participation in volunteering. Social change as a personal value.	Q: What factors influenced your choice of profession? A: [...] **I took up social work as a vocation**, because I wanted to work with people. **I was interested in working with people**, face to face! To be there! Where there is a need for people who are ready to talk, to help others and to resolve social problems (Participant 1). Q: What factors influenced your choice of profession? A: When I was in my 3rd or 4th year of secondary school, it was a time of mobilization among students and I developed a concern for social problems. From then, **I started doing volunteering work** and I became interested in the whole **ideal of social change**. That is what motivated me to choose this profession (Participant 12).

Table 4.
Coding chart: Chile students.

Research objective No. 1	Codes (Level 1 – initial)	Interview excerpts
Describe the motivations of men who choose to pursue studies in a profession socially viewed as feminine.	Profession that enables personal and social development. Difficult experiences in personal past. Social work corresponded with my personal goals.	Q: What factors influenced your choice of profession? A: It is **a profession that allows me to work on myself [...] to be a better communicator** and also to become the best person that I can be [...] to be a model who can inspire others (Participant 7). Q: What factors influenced your choice of profession? A: Having been through difficult experiences in my life turned me toward this work [...] social work corresponded with what I wanted from my university studies after my wild youth (Participant 11).

Table 5.
Coding chart: Quebec students.

identifying descriptive codes, researchers have two options: using words or phrases drawn directly from participant testimonies (Level 1) or, where more appropriate, making reference to concepts drawn from relevant theory. The body of accumulated conceptual knowledge allows social work researchers to contextualize problems under study and more fully understand participants' subjective reality. Social work researchers must remain conscious, however, of how their hypotheses influence their formulations of research questions, objectives, and resulting methodological choices that necessarily precede their analyses.

In order to systematically classify the information, codes and interview excerpts should be grouped in relation to clearly identify study objectives, as shown in **Tables 4** and **5**. Particularly for researchers unfamiliar with thematic analysis, this method is effective in developing a better grasp of the classification processes involved in classifying generated data within the scope of defined study objectives.

Codes are always a combination of the descriptive and interpretive. This is evident in the preliminary codes cited in **Tables 4** and **5**.

It is important to note that this method does not require codes to be generated for every line of transcript in the data set. Depending on interview type, a data set typically contains between 7000 and 9000 words, or close to 700 lines. A code can represent two, three, or more lines of transcript. It is always advisable to begin by working with the specific words used by participants (Level 1) and only after repeated readings to begin establishing links with concepts drawn from theory (Level 2), as in **Table 6**, for example.

Phase 2 concludes once all the elements of the data set have been coded. It is important to note that there is no minimum or maximum number of codes to be generated from a data set: the number is determined by each researcher's judgment in assessing what is or is not pertinent, a skill that develops over time, in the course of work with transcripts.

5.3 Phase 3: Searching for themes

In qualitative research, a theme (sometimes also termed "category") [31] is an element of data or sequence of words that can serve as a synoptic and accurate representation of the signification that interviewed participants attribute to an object, phenomenon, or situation. A theme, therefore, is composed of coded data grouped together according to similarities or patterns.

The search for themes is open ended, and the number and variety of results will depend on how systematically and thoroughly the first two phases were carried out. The process involves identification, differentiation, recombination, and grouping:

Objective	Primary theme (level 2)	Subthemes	Codes (level 1 – adjusted)
Describe the motivations of men who choose to pursue studies in a profession socially viewed as feminine.	**Influence of life trajectory.**	Education experiences. Personal experiences. Professional trajectory.	• Educational performance • Intellectual and personal development • Prior illness/negative experiences • Orientation by a social worker • Desire to help others • Prior work experiences • Parental influence

Table 6.
Thematic matrix.

Primary theme	Subtheme	Codes
Influence of life trajectories.	Educational motivations. Personal motivations. Professional motivations.	• Good educational performance • Intellectual development • Prior illness/negative experiences • Orientation by a social worker • Desire to help others • Parental influence • Prior experience as a social work technician

Table 7.
Final thematic matrix.

certain themes will emerge distinctly from the data, others will be the product of either identifying more than one theme in what at first appeared to be one integral category, while others will emerge from the fusion of two or more themes that initially appeared distinct; themes that are divergent, yet related, may also be grouped into broader categories. With certain data sets, yet another level of classification will map the hierarchical relationships between themes. For Crabtree and Miller [57], the process of linking themes leads to the discovery of yet other themes and patterns in the data, that is, it generates overarching themes and allows for the identification of broad connections. This process of grouping distinct elements identified within a data set into themes constitutes the core task of thematic analysis.

In the example of the study discussed in the present article, data collected from interviews with Chilean and Québec students[1] were coded according to the study's primary objective. As **Table 7** demonstrates, a primary theme was identified in reference to theory (influence of life trajectory), while three subthemes emerged from the coded data.

Table 6 demonstrates how a primary theme connects three subthemes generated from seven distinct codes. In this example, the motivations to pursue social work of Chilean and Québec students participating in the study were all grouped in the primary theme "Influence of life trajectory."

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[1] This study was built on the analysis of interviews with twenty-six (n = 26) students: 13 are respondents enrolled in a social work program at the University of Québec in Abitibi-Témiscamingue (UQAT) in Canada and the thirteen others enrolled in a social work program at a university of Concepción. The first participants were recruited by way of e-mail messages sent to male students enrolled at the University of Concepción and of University of Quebec in Abitibi-Témiscamingue on in undergraduate social work studies for the winter semesters of 2014 and 2015. The rest were recruited using the "snowball".

As mentioned above, there are no guidelines dictating minimum or maximum numbers of themes or subthemes to identify in a given study, independent of particular factors, such as number of participants. It is of utmost importance that themes and subthemes be delineated precisely in order to represent accurately and comprehensively the complexity of data collected from study participants. Themes therefore will vary qualitatively, substantively, and quantitatively from one study to another. In the example cited, a single-primary theme proved sufficiently broad to represent the significations derived from the data, enabling the authors to answer the research question and achieve the study objective.

A method useful in Phase 3 is to elaborate a coding sheet on which to classify elements of data that could not be precisely categorized in Phase 2 or that do not appear directly linked with the research question or study objectives. These data can prove highly relevant later, as additional themes are identified.

The process of identifying themes in Phase 3 of the thematic analysis can be divided into five stages:

- reading through the coding generated during Phase 2 (see **Table 5**), from right to left, in order to verify the accuracy of the identified elements of data;

- assessing the correlation of codes with interview excerpts, as well as their relevance in relation to study objectives;

- grouping the coded information in reference to concepts or sequences of words according to similarities or patterns: this is the identification of themes;

- reviewing the identified themes in order to further categorize subthemes, overarching themes, or groups of themes, as the case may be; and

- reading the material in order to identify hierarchical relationships between the themes.

Throughout this process, it is essential to keep in mind the stated study objectives, as well as to question continually whether the codes, themes, and subthemes are relevant to the research question and study objectives or whether they fall beyond the delineated scope of the study. It is important to point out that the themes and subthemes in which codes are grouped can represent concepts drawn from theory or original categories elaborated by the researcher. The epistemological challenge for researchers is to remain analytical in relation to the data that emerge from this phase of coding and to analyze them with reference to theory.

Phase 3 culminates in the elaboration of a thematic matrix that demonstrates connections between themes, subthemes, and codes (see **Table 7**). The matrix offers a clear overview of the ordered complexity of the relationships identified within the data set. It is useful, as well, to include within the matrix a column listing the study objectives or research question, providing an easily accessible reference with which to verify the relevance of data to the stated research goals.

5.4 Phase 4: Reviewing the themes

A comprehensive description of a given phenomenon requires a systematic review of the themes identified in Phase 3. Although, for the purposes of discussion, Phase 4 is identified as distinct from and subsequent to Phase 3, in practice researchers familiar with thematic analysis will frequently carry out the two phases simultaneously.

The reviewing process carried out in Phase 4 asks a series of questions about the various elements of data identified up to that point, including:

- Is this a theme, subtheme, or code?

- Does the theme accurately represent the data with which it is linked (codes and interview excerpts)?

- Is the theme too abstract or difficult to understand or, conversely, is it so specific that it cannot be linked more broadly with data?

- Is there a clearly identifiable logic to the hierarchical relationships between themes, subthemes, and codes (i.e., clear distinction between broader categories and more specific elements, as in **Table 7**?

- Which data do the theme include and which do these exclude?

- Is the theme a good representation of the subthemes? Are the subthemes a good representation of the codes?

- Does the thematic matrix contain the information necessary to answer the research question and the study objectives?

These questions allow the researcher to assess the validity of the matrix and the coherence of its components. As in the preceding steps, validating the relevance of each element and the links between them is essential to ensuring the authenticity of results. It is important, however, to nuance the notion of validity. In qualitative research, a result is only considered valid if it is reproducible, that is, if it is not an individual occurrence of a given observation. Validity, moreover, may be internal or external. Internal validity refers to the degree to which valid conclusions can be drawn from a study, based on an assessment of all research parameters. External validity is the degree to which internally valid results may be extrapolated beyond specific study samples and settings, that is, to people and contexts other than those considered in the study.

A range of factors may have an incidence on a study's internal validity, including participants' personal histories, maturation and pretest habituation, participant selection, experimental mortality, and instrument bias. External validity is subject to other factors, such as interaction between historical factors and interventions, the effect of reactivity (that is, participants' awareness of taking part in a study resulting changes in behavior), and researcher bias.

Researchers must also take into account other dimensions of validity relevant to social work research, for example, reflexive practice in collaboration with other researchers [58], data triangulation [59, 60], and iterative research that allows participants to react to interpretations of previous results.

A detailed, comprehensive review of the thematic matrix frequently results in adjustments, including changes to the designations and relative positions of codes and themes, as well as the outright deletion of certain themes and subthemes that are not relevant to the research question (see **Table 7**). As a result of this review process, it is often necessary to rename themes that prove unclear, inaccurate, or disconnected from the identified codes. In such cases, themes are said to have evolved. As with each step of each phase, it is through the practice of these operations that researchers unfamiliar with thematic analysis will develop a better grasp of its techniques.

A comparison between **Tables 6** and **7** illustrates this process. In this case, the subthemes initially identified as referring to experiences were adjusted in **Table 7** to

represent motivations. A second important change consisted in adjusting the code designated in **Table 6** as "educational performance," in order to further specify "**good** educational performance" in **Table 7**. A final change made to the thematic matrix concerned the position of the "**parental influence**" code, which had been placed in the "professional trajectory" subtheme in **Table 7** but, subsequent to review, was placed within the "personal motivations" subtheme in **Table 7**. In this example, the other data in the matrix remained unchanged following the Phase 4 review (see **Table 7**).

A valuable method of ensuring that the themes, subthemes, and codes are clearly delineated and appropriately positioned is to submit the thematic matrix to additional review by one or two researchers uninvolved in the study who are familiar with thematic analysis methods. If the reliability analysis process is successful, that is, if the independent reviewers concur that the themes reliably represent the codes derived from the data set to which they are linked within the matrix, the thematic analysis can proceed to Phase 5.

5.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Phase 5 consists of two major stages. First, the themes and subthemes undergo a definitive revision. Thus, the thematic matrix must once again be analyzed thoroughly in order to assess the validity of hierarchical relationships and verify whether the designations given at both levels are an accurate reflection of the significations represented by the codes. It is essential that names given to the themes be revised repeatedly, until no ambiguities remain as to their accuracy. The second stage of Phase 5 is interpretive and consists in the conceptual definition of the themes and subthemes that will be subject to analysis in Phase 6.

For example, in determining the subthemes presented in **Table 7**, the authors referred to the following definitions of educational, personal, and professional motivations:

- Educational motivations: an individual's [student's] capacity to construct short- and long-term objectives [in their educational trajectory], notwithstanding difficulties. It is through motivation that needs are transformed into objectives and projects [61, 62].

- Personal motivations: the choice, energy, and direction of behavior [63].

- Professional motivations: the set of dynamic factors that determine an individual's [student's] interest in succeeding [in the chosen profession] [64].

In defining themes, it is advisable to refer exclusively to specialized reference works conventionally accepted in relevant fields of study, such as dictionaries or encyclopedias of social work, education, or sociology, depending on the focus of a given study.

It is important to mention that the boundary between Phases 4 and 5 may be difficult to pinpoint, since both involve a revision of the themes. The distinction lies in that the final revision and conclusive assessment of themes in Phase 5 is the culmination of the repeated reviews of designations, categories, and relationships performed in Phase 4. In Phase 5, therefore, the researcher's principal task is to define and name the themes, in reference to all the operations performed in the previous phases, ensuring that they faithfully represent the significations emerging from the data set.

5.6 Phase 6: Presenting and discussing results

Whether to be included in a book, article, or other form of publication, the crux of the material supporting the results presented and discussed is to be found in notes taken by researchers during interviews with participants and the thematic matrix developed in Phase 3 and revised in Phase 4. For the purposes of the present discussion, it is worthwhile to address the two main components of Phase 6, presentation and discussion, as distinct from one another.

In the presentation of results, researchers must produce a clear and coherent description that makes reference the data outlined in the thematic matrix. The presentation should be accompanied by explanations and clarifications sufficient for readers unfamiliar with the specific area of study to understand the results without room for erroneous interpretation. It is highly advisable to quote interview excerpts that are particularly illustrative of the assertions and conclusions described.

A clear presentation of data outlined in the thematic matrix should reflect the order of the hierarchical relationships between the themes and subthemes. In the study of Chilean and Québec students enrolled in social work programs described in the present article, the primary theme of "**influence of life trajectories**" integrated all subthemes and associated codes. The presentation of results, therefore, began with a description of the primary theme and then proceeded through a descriptive and coherent account, supported by illustrative interview excerpts, that outlined all relevant elements of data, beginning with the most broadly inclusive (primary theme) and proceeding toward the most specific (codes).

This is clearly evident in the following excerpt of the presentation of results in the study involving male social work students in Chile and Québec, which provides valuable examples of thematic analysis methods.

6. Results

This section will first present the motivations that prompt Chilean and Québec male students' choices to undertake social work. [...] On the personal level, the two primary motivations that emerge from the testimonies of Chilean students are the desire to help others and the appeal of social work as a vocation, followed in the order of importance by the influence of family or social circle members who had studied social work.

The following excerpt from the testimony of one student (1) illustrates the motivation to help others and undertake social work as a vocation: "I went into social work [...] to be able to help people. I believe that this is the factor that made me enrol" (René). The testimonies of Québec students, however, suggest that their strong motivations are attributable to good relationships with family, specifically parents [who had worked in the health system], and negative personal experiences in the past, among others. The testimony of one participant typifies this primary motivation of most Québec students participating in the present study: "The fact of having two parents who work in the health system. Since I was little, I have been going to hospitals and I have seen how it all works" (Simon) [54].

It is important that the presentation of results remains descriptive, as in the example cited above. The logical question to ask at this point is: when does the presentation of results end? The answer, too, is logical: when the relevant elements of the final subtheme have been presented. In the study cited above, therefore, the presentation concludes with a description of the professional motivations subtheme (see **Table 7**). Once the results have been comprehensively presented, they must subsequently be discussed.

In the discussion, researchers must address the presented results within an analytical perspective. As in the example cited below, the discussion makes reference to the broader literature relevant to the phenomenon under study:

> *The present study offers comparative and complementary views on the various dimensions associated with the motivations of men who engage in social work. Participants' answers to the question "What made you choose social work studies?", suggest that their motivations are varie, "multifactorial" [65] and linked with life trajectories. At the level of the sub-category of "educational motivations," it appears that Chilean men seek cognitive and technical skills with which to achieve their goal of social change. The results suggest that these men aspire to the values of social work (EASSW, 2015 [3]) and a more humanist and just society in which social work occupies a position of importance among social science professions. These motivations originate in two factors. One is the participants' social engagement prior to enrolling in university studies. The other is their personal orientation towards humanist values. In the case of participants from Québec, their main motivations lie in good results obtained during pre-university social science studies, which inspired them to undertake social work at university. Our results corroborate a number of previous studies [54, 66, 67].*

The above excerpt illustrates how the discussion builds on the description of results in order to produce an analytical discourse that compares and contrasts the results and conclusions of the study with those of other studies and authors.

There are three main guidelines to keep in mind when presenting and discussing the results of a thematic analysis:

- The discussion should follow the same order of themes as in the presentation of results.

- It should underscore and further develop those themes that most closely correlate with the stated study objectives; it is not always possible to address all the obtained results within the discussion; therefore, a capacity to synthesize is particularly useful at this last stage of the thematic analysis.

- The discussion must be framed analytically; the goal is to go beyond the descriptive, in order to demonstrate why the results are meaningful within the context of previous research.

7. Conclusion

As a qualitative research method that offers a simultaneously flexible and rigorous approach to data, thematic analysis allows social work students and novice social work researchers to approach the discourses, opinions, and visions of respondents both analytically. These qualities make it particularly applicable to social work research. Thematic analysis also represents the intellectual and ethic challenge, for experienced and novice researchers alike, of attempting to reveal and interpret themes and subthemes in the participants' discourse. The ethical challenge for researchers is to avoid substituting personal objectives for research objectives, since this may impact the interpretation of data collected from participants and, consequently, skew study results.

The other challenge facing social work researchers employing thematic analysis is to keep their subjectivity in check. When describing and categorizing testimonies

of human experiences, perspectives, and emotions, whether expressed in words or communicated inadvertently by respondents through behavior during interviews, researchers must remain especially vigilant so that their author's own personal histories and professional experiences do not contaminate their interpretation of the data, altering the significance of participant testimonies. Indeed, this reflects one of the fundamental principles of social work practice and research methodologies that knowledge and techniques must always be applied methodically and objectively.

From the example that is present in this work and following the six stages of the thematic analysis, the researcher can draw inspiration to use this method of analysis and to apply other research designs. Finally, the qualitative research in Trabajo Social students from the two participating universities allowed us to use thematic analysis to better understand the motivations, difficulties, and anchors that make students from two different realities interest in social work.

Limitations

The thematic analysis approach discussed in the present paper must be interpreted with prudence. The article cited above provides a case example of how thematic analysis was applied in one study examining why men choose to undertake social work as an area of study. An additional limitation is the difficulty for researchers to ignore previous, tacit knowledge, which may have influenced the analysis of results [68]. Furthermore, the construction of certain themes and subthemes cited in Labra [54] may have been influenced by social desirability, that is, formulated so as to correspond with researchers' expectations, given that Nvivo® software was not used to manage qualitative data. Nevertheless, the research design of the case example presented above, in which the interview guide was elaborated in reference to both the specific problem under study and a directly relevant conceptual framework, constitutes a significant element underpinning the validity of the thematic analysis approach.

Thanks

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