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Lost in translation: Reflexive thematic analysis in research with Pacific peoples

This paper reflects on reflexive thematic analyses with Pacific peoples from different cultural and language backgrounds. This paper will briefly describe reflexive thematic analysis according to Braun et al. (2019) and reflect upon issues concerning thematic analysis and Pacific cultures and languages. As academics, researchers, and practitioners, "we engage in a co-construction of knowledge" with our communities while adhering to cross-cultural notions of respect (Enari & Rangiwai, 2021, p. 2). We draw upon our collective cultural knowledge to offer a unique insider perspective (Enari & Rangiwai, 2021) concerning our current understandings of reflexive thematic analysis as it applies to research with Pacific peoples.

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Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun et al. (2019) developed a reflexive thematic analysis method to analyse and interpret data from interviews. In reflexive thematic analysis, "themes are conceptualized as meaning-based patterns, evident in explicit (semantic) or conceptual (latent) ways" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 848). As "the *output* of coding—themes result *from* considerable analytic work on the part of the researcher to explore and develop an understanding of patterned meaning across the dataset" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 848).

Braun et al. (2019) outlined six phases of reflexive thematic analysis:

- Familiarisation
- Generating codes
- Constructing themes
- Revising themes
- Defining themes
- Producing the report.

The *familiarisation* process is, as its name suggests, about becoming familiar with the dataset: "The process involves becoming "immersed" in the data and connecting with them in different ways" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 852). Familiarisation of the dataset includes re-listening to interviews, re-reading transcripts, "noticing" interesting features" (p. 852) and making relaxed but "thoughtful and curious" notes about what was (re)heard and (re)read" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 852).

The process of *generating codes* from a dataset requires "focussed attention, to systematically and rigorously make sense of data" and "succinctly and systematically" identify meaning in the data (Braun et al., 2019, p. 853).

The process involves attaching concise and clear codes to bits of data to arrange the data around emerging patterns of meaning (Braun et al., 2019).

Braun et al. (2019) identified two levels of analysis for generating codes: semantic and latent. Codes generated at the semantic level are concerned only with surface meaning; whereas, codes generated at the latent level are concerned with deeper, conceptual and, sometimes, abstract meaning (Braun et al., 2019).

The process for *constructing themes* involves grouping similar codes together as "building blocks" with which to construct themes that draw upon patterns of meaning to "tell a coherent, insightful story about the data in relation to the research question" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 854). These stories are revealed by the researcher "at the intersection of data, researcher experience and subjectivity, and research question(s)" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 854).

Revising and *defining* themes are two phases of the process that go together: "The revising and defining phases seek to ensure that themes, *and* theme names, clearly, comprehensively *and* concisely capture what is meaningful about the data" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 857). Revising themes includes reviewing coded data pertaining to a theme to ensure that the information relates to the central concept of the research and the dataset (Braun et al., 2019). The accurate definition of a theme signifies the "scope and "core"" of, and sets the parameters for, each theme (Braun et al., 2019, p. 856).

The final part of the reflexive thematic analysis process is *Producing the report.* This stage is not merely the write-up but is "a final test of how well the themes work,

individually in relation to the dataset, and overall" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 857).

Pacific reflections on reflexive thematic analysis

As colleagues, we discussed at length the reflexive thematic analysis method developed by Braun et al. (2019) and thematic analysis, more broadly, and its use in research with Pacific peoples of diverse cultures and languages. Our conversation revealed issues in the reflexive thematic analysis approach when applied to research with Pacific peoples, where more than one culture and language group was involved and where the researcher may not be of the same culture and language group/s of the participants.

In reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher is required to interpret the data set (Enari, 2021). However, in an experimental, reflexive thematic analysis scenario facilitated by the lead author of this paper, we found ourselves reverting to English at both the coding and theming stages to attempt to capture Samoan, Tongan, and Māori concepts. For example, in our experiment, we developed the theme "cultural way" to describe anga fakatonga, fa'asamoa, and tikanga Māori; we did this to ensure that we had some collective sense of what those terms meant while recognising that significant meaning would be lost in translation. Indeed, translation of terms can result in lost meaning, differences in meaning, and data invalidation (Al-Amer et al., 2019; Ethelb, 2019; Smith et al., 2008).

Due to the fragility of Pacific languages in the face of western influence, coupled with the worldwide dominance of English, reflexive thematic analysis privileges the use of the English language (Enari &

Fa'aea, 2020; Fa'aea & Enari, 2021). Our reverting to English—the most used language for disseminating research findings (Esfehani & Walters, 2018)—was a poignant and highly problematic example of this. Our reflexive thematic analysis experiment demonstrated the importance of the researcher being of the same cultural and language background as the participants. This would hopefully ensure that the nuances of language and culture would be more accurately captured (Enari & Matapo, 2020, 2021; Lemusuifeauaali�ï & Enari 2021). Certainly, the use of Pacific languages is imperative to their survival (Enari & Faleolo, 2020; Samu et al., 2019). We believe too that it may not be enough to say that a "Pasifika researcher" is able to work on all research concerning Pacific peoples. Given that the term Pasifika— a Niuean term commonly used in Aotearoa New Zealand to describe people from the Pacific islands—itself has been criticised for veiling the distinctiveness of individual cultures in the Pacific (Samu et al., 2019), we argue for the uniqueness of the various Pacific groups to be recognised through enhanced research practice. Because if research aims to capture information from particular communities more accurately—to assist in the positive transformation of those communities—both the researcher and participants must be from the same culture and language contexts, only then will research truly be for the community, by the community.

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