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Themes, variables, and the limits to calculating sample size in qualitative research: a response to Fugard and Potts

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Andrew Fugard and Henry Potts' paper joins a small number of papers that seek to justify sample size through counting themes. Unlike the other two papers I can think of, Guest and colleagues and Francis and colleagues experiments to achieve theoretical saturation (both cited by these authors) this paper takes a non-experimental approach. Interestingly, however, all three papers are constrained in the same way, but while the two experimental papers recognise that the lessons learnt from their experiments have particular limitations this paper's approach is rather more cavalier.

The assumption in this paper is that thematic analysis leads to finding themes and this is the end of the analytic process. Many qualitative researchers would not agree with this rather limiting view. Indeed these authors seem to be struggling to constrain qualitative researching within a rather narrow vision. This tension is expressed through the various definitions of themes in the paper, which are described in four quite distinct ways. Working through the paper, the first description, 'a theme is present in someone's view' (p. 5). Second, and in the same list of bullet points, themes are described as a 'collections of utterances that inspire themes' (p. 9). A third approach considers themes as (disease) 'disorders' which may include 'combinations of 2 diagnoses (comorbidity)' (p. 11). A fourth version of themes discussed in the paper is 'a theory-guided (and justified) theme hierarchy' (p. 14). These are diverse accounts. They lead to three quite distinct definitions of theme. The first description suggests a theme is a respondent's account of events. The third definition, with its focus on disease and co-morbidity, suggests thematic analysis proceeds through fitting evidence to a diagnostic manual like the DSM 5 (2013) for instance. Descriptions two and four suggest abstraction in some way from evidence by researchers.

This account of thematic abstraction fits most closely with the way in which most qualitative researchers proceed in an analysis. Ideas and evidence are brought into relation with each other in an iterative engagement to construct or produce (depending on your epistemological position) interpretation and/or explanation. Fugard and Potts recognise this temporal progression throughout the research. As they note 'different assumptions are made explicit and can then be considered and discussed by the research team, reviewers, and stakeholders' (p. 10). But, to return to the methodology of the paper, a definition of thematic analysis that accepts a

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move from fragile and superficial accounts to more nuanced, richer and detailed interpretation cannot be sustained.

This paper assumes that themes can be predicted in a population beforehand and their prevalence known in some way. The actual definition of a theme in this paper, which is never explicitly stated, is a theme as variable. A variable's relation is, as Herbert Blumer observed, a 'single relation necessarily stripped bare of the complex things that sustain it in a "here and now" context' (1956, p. 685 – emphasis in the original). And further, drawing on Byrne's writings on quantitative method (2002, 2012), variables provide an account of the traces of systems that make up reality. In short, for many researchers from both qualitative and quantitative traditions the variable is only the starting point in understanding themes. Through investigation, interpretation and explanation what is at first thought to be the 'prevalence' of a theme is disrupted as the descriptive baseline of the theme is extended through the research. Fugard and Potts know this, their definition of themes as abstractions from empirical evidence brought into some relation with ideas is what most qualitative (and quantitative) researchers are trying to achieve in their research.

To return to the two experimental papers that provide some of the early justification for this paper. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) are very careful to place boundaries around how their experiment may be interpreted. They emphasise how homogeneous experiences were for the sex workers in both Ghana and Nigeria with whom they conducted their study. They point to the narrowly-focussed and prescribed method they used. Similarly, Francis and colleagues emphasise that their analysis of theoretical saturation assumes 'clarity among the coders about what constitutes a single belief. This assumption appeared to be non-problematic in the special case of the analysis based on (a theory of planned behaviour) but such judgements may not be as clear in other types of studies' (Francis et al., 2010, p. 1243). The conclusions to these two papers need to be understood in this context of narrow focus in research practice. Fugard and Potts are far less cautious in both defining what is meant by the term theme – a variable account of the social process under investigation in the research – and the limits that flow from this approach to inform decisions about sample size for qualitative research more generally. This paper needs to be read with this narrow definition of theme in mind. As such the paper will be of little value in justifying sample size beyond a very precise qualitative research design in which theme and variable may be used interchangeably.

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