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‘Shine bright like a diamond’? A reply to Braun and Clarke

Andrew J. B. Fugard^a and Henry W. W. Potts^b

^aResearch Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology, University College London, London, UK;

^bInstitute of Health Informatics, University College London, London, UK

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We thank the authors for their commentary and humbly accept their chiding about our language on the ontological nature of themes. While noting that many qualitative researchers are content with talk of ‘themes emerging’ (e.g. Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Rennie, 1996), we recognise Braun and Clarke’s concerns around such language (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and concur with their views on the role of the researcher in the analysis. Nonetheless, there is *something* in the data that underscores the researcher’s interpretation. The process is more complex than finding a diamond in the sand, it is not just about a theme emerging passively, yet that does not break the idea behind the approach we presented. Whatever you want to call the *something* that is in the data, and we could use ‘codes’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or maybe ‘accounts’ (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015), that *something* can be conceptualised along the same lines.

That *something* may or may not be present in a particular interview, some *somethings* will be more prevalent than others. If we want to capture more *somethings* and less common *somethings*, there are various approaches you can take. Morse (2000) and Malterud et al. (2015) discuss these, including varying your sampling strategy or how you perform the interviews, but they, and others (Tracy, 2010), agree that more participants is sometimes appropriate.

To quote Malterud et al. (2015, p. 6), ‘The best qualitative analysis is conducted from empirical data containing abundant and various accounts of new aspects of the phenomenon we intend to explore [...] The sample should be neither too small nor too large’. We concur. We should have said more about the ‘too large’ and agree with Braun and Clarke’s observation that larger numbers can lead to less rigour in other ways, as has also been said of randomised controlled trials. But more is *sometimes* better. We also contend that our model does not point to ‘relatively large sample sizes’: our approach is consistent with the numbers in Braun and Clarke (2013).

Where our approach differs from others is the addition of probability theory. Malterud et al. (2015, p. 3) write ‘we might be fortunate and drop into a group of participants with a diversity of experiences. Hence, sample specificity cannot always be predicted but can be supported by suitable recruitment’. Sampling indeed involves an element of chance. You do not know what someone is going to say before you talk to them. Research participants will have different experiences or perspectives: what you get in your sample ‘cannot always be predicted’. We all might be fortunate or unfortunate in our sampling. We can use maths to put likely bounds on those chances. We don’t believe an observation about numbers contradicts non-positivist approaches.

Our intuitions can be wrong with probabilities. By giving a probabilistic formula, we aim to assist researchers’ thinking on sample sizes. Probability theory is a way of helping to achieve that goal of

'abundant and various accounts'. We do not claim this element of thinking about sample size is more important than other factors discussed in Malterud et al. (2015), Morse (2000), Tracy (2010) etc.

As per Reicher (2000), we view the contrast between quantitative and qualitative methods to be unhelpful, while acknowledging profound epistemological differences between positivism and other positions. We have repeatedly been described as positivists, but one of us (HP) identifies more with constructionism (e.g. Greenhalgh, Potts, Wong, Bark, & Swinglehurst, 2009). The other (AF) is hesitant about committing publicly to a particular -ism, but feels drawn to epistemological anarchism (Feyerabend, 1975).

Our work is not a quant attack on qual. We intend it as a bridge, a piece of maths that helps us think about chance, because chance is part of qualitative research and qualitative sampling. If there is a random element, then why deny the value of probability? Chance is difficult to think about without a theory and probability theory is not a bad place to start. Qualitative researchers do not need to abandon their ethos to use maths.

Let us end by quoting Reicher (2000, p. 2) again:

any critical comments that I make are understood as a contribution to the developing debate rather than an attempt to kill the debate at birth. Whatever disagreements I do have, they are secondary to my wish to see the widest and fullest discussion possible. For those within different traditions, to engage in that discussion would be a great step forward. Even if we end up disagreeing we may also come to understand our differences and recognize, perhaps even respect, the bases of such difference.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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