



Emerging Themes: The Researcher's Experience

Renata Tesch

Santa Barbara, CA

The term "theme" is a prominent word in the human science researcher's vocabulary. Without it, it would be difficult to describe what human science researchers do. In dealing with their data, they "search" for themes, and they "find" themes, or they "extract," "recognize," or "identify" them.

Most often, however, themes are said to *emerge*, or they "appear," "occur," "stand out," "arise," or "reveal themselves." It seems odd, not only for control-oriented researchers from positivistic traditions, but for most scholars who encounter the notions of human science research for the first time, that something should happen that does not seem to be primarily an action of the researcher. Why do researchers prefer a more passive, slightly withdrawing, almost mysterious language when they tell about themes?

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The most direct way of exploring this question is, naturally, to ask researchers what they mean. Several years ago I conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen researchers, mostly doctoral students, about their phenomenological research experience. These dialogues included the issue of emerging themes. Because doctoral students usually describe the data analysis process in some detail in their dissertations, I examined such descriptions from an additional 20 researchers. But I also wanted to include experts, that is, scholars who have done more than one such research project or guided their students through them, and who have thoughtfully reflected on the process, or written about it. Therefore, I added pertinent writings to my collection of sources, and I also surveyed a number of researchers whom I knew personally. (I received 11 responses as a result of 19 requests, see notes.) Thus I had quite a broad data base. Not only was my data base extensive, but it contained many details, colorful anecdotes, and illuminating metaphors, only very few of which I could integrate into this paper. Here the individual accounts are brought together to form an intersubjective description of some of the researcher's major experiences in the process of making sense of the data.

What Are Themes?

I had originally intended to look exclusively at the nature of the process of the emergence of themes. However, this proved to be impossible without gaining some clarity about what researchers mean

when they say “theme.” Not only do researchers differ in their use of the term, but sometimes the same person may use the word with different meanings. Some researchers specifically define what they consider the word “theme” to mean, but most imply a definition. After attending to the various usages, my conclusion is that there are two main meanings to the word in human science research:

1. *Theme* can mean something akin to the content, or topic, or statement, or fact, in a piece of data; expressed more simply, what the data segment is about.
2. *Theme* can also mean a major dimension, major aspect, or constituent of the phenomenon studied; expressed more simply, a partial descriptor of the phenomenon.

Considering many of the researchers’ tendency toward individualism and their tolerance for other people’s way of seeing and describing their world, it is not surprising that there are also examples of usages that lie anywhere between the two outlined above. However, in general, the distinction seems to be a valid one. Some researchers, in fact, use descriptive adjectives to make sure the reader knows which one they have in mind, for instance, initial themes, tentative themes, individual themes, factual themes, preliminary themes versus core themes, basic themes, central themes, metathemes, existential themes, final themes, major themes, or essential themes. In this paper I will adopt the word *metathemes* (used first, as far as I know, by Valerie Polakow Suransky in her doctoral dissertation) to refer to the major dimensions of the phenomenon studied (number 2 above). Methathemes, in their polished and final form, are the phenomenological researcher’s equivalent of the study’s “results.” When I use the word *themes* I am referring to the brief statements that describe the content of individual units of data text.

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Because it turned out that there are two distinguishable concepts contained in the original word “theme,” I found myself asking:

1. How, if at all, are themes, the individual bits of data content, and metathemes, the constituents of the phenomenon, related?
2. If “themes” are said to emerge, is this equally true for both types? Do researchers experience themes, as well as metathemes, as “emerging,” rather than as being extracted or constructed?

Before answering these questions, it will be useful to review the actual process of working with data material in a phenomenological way. Obviously, the researcher must begin somewhere and intends to end somewhere. Thus there is a movement, a progression, and eventually, an arrival. It would be wrong, however, to picture this movement as a straight, sequential process. It is even a bit misleading to think of it as a process. To conjure up an image of what this movement is like, it helps to see it more in terms of a flow, or of a cycling and spiraling motion that has no clearly distinguishable

steps or phases. Typically, the researcher would be hard pressed to say where this flow begins. She knows only that her first data collection session already contained the seeds of what is usually termed the "analysis." The first ideas of how to make sense of the data are born then, and other ideas may come to her at any time during any research activity, even up to the eventual writing of the results. When I, in the following, break down the stream of events into a logical sequence, it is merely for the sake of easier communication.

The Flow of Analysis

Researchers agree that the actual analytical activities start with an immersion in the data as a whole, that is, entire transcripts or protocols. They speak of extensive readings and rereadings, and of "dwelling" on the data before their attention becomes focused on details. The data are divided into smaller units by delineating the boundaries of parts. Most phenomenological researchers call the smallest data pieces they delimit "meaning units." It is here that themes find their place. Themes express the meaning of the segments the researcher has bounded. Although sometimes these meanings can be captured in the words of the research participants themselves, more often the researcher is faced with the task of "naming," "linguaging," "spelling out," "making explicit," "formulating," or "articulating" the meaning.¹

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There are two approaches to working with text details. Max van Manen calls them the "highlighting approach" and the "line-by-line" approach (1984, p. 60). When highlighting, the researcher looks for statements in the text that are particularly revealing about the experience being described. When proceeding line by line, she considers each sentence and tries to discern what it means with regard to the phenomenon she is exploring. I like to think of these two approaches as panning and surveying. When panning, the researcher looks for precious elements, which take the form of descriptive expressions in the material that are "at the center" of the experience, those that address "its nature," or "directly pertain" to the phenomenon. All other ingredients are sifted out; they are not included in the analysis. The line-by-line approach can be thought of as surveying, where the researcher looks at each square inch of her territory and tries to capture what is there, making sure that nothing important is overlooked. Both activities are rather "disciplined" and "systematic"; in fact, it is here that the rigor of phenomenological research becomes most apparent. The result of the process is a list of themes, some of them more tentatively formulated than others, and some more revelatory of the experience than others.

The researcher continues to refine the phrasing of the themes and to confirm their relevance. After working with each interview, transcript, or protocol in turn, the researcher broadens her attention and compares the themes from one protocol with those from the

others. She is exploring to see whether she can find “common themes” that are “shared” among the participants in her study, themes that constitute a “common thread.” (This is one way of discerning the “invariants,” the elements that don’t vary across the cases and, therefore, can be seen as the phenomenon’s constituents.) Some researchers see the activity of finding common themes as a “clustering” or gathering of statements that are conceptually “similar.” They may consider it a form of ordering themes according to “categories.” van Kaam calls this sorting “classifying” (1966, p. 314). Categories function somewhat like a filebox which allows the researcher to organize her data so that things that belong together are put together. The filebox metaphor, however, omits a crucial attribute of the process; the image is too tidy. Things don’t fit into slots that neatly! Some themes overlap, and could be sorted into more than one category. For others the borders are fuzzy, and they are not clearly distinguishable from one another. Max van Manen does not think in terms of categories, but uses the metaphor of discovering the “knots in the web” (1984, p. 59). Others think of them as “patterns” in the Bateson sense of “patterns that connect” (1979, p. 8).

When dealing with themes and patterns it becomes obvious that something that can be experienced only as a whole has been taken apart in a somewhat unnatural fashion to allow the human mind to get a better grasp of it. However, it is during this crucial process of pattern detection that the metathemes emerge.

Before attending to metathemes, a brief digression is necessary. While identifying the common themes, the researcher also notices unique themes. These unique themes may be idiosyncratic ways in which the phenomenon manifests itself. They can make us aware of the range of individuality in the shared experience. The search for common themes that helps us to discern the pattern should not be misapprehended as a rule that reads: Only what is shared, only what “matches,” forms the pattern and leads to metathemes. There is no such foolproof formula for identifying metathemes. Again, we are dealing with a flow, with a process in which things happen that cannot be produced merely by following instructions.

Metathemes are what phenomenologists often call the “essence” of the phenomenon, the fundamental constituents. Words like “components,” “dimensions,” “aspects,” “features,” or “basic principles” have been used to describe the nature of these themes. Many researchers accept Giorgi’s choice of “constituents” (1975, p. 74), which more aptly expresses the notion of context embeddedness.

Although the very fact that metathemes are being identified points to a singling out of constituents, the same activity also includes a connecting of themes. Researchers realize that there are “interrelations” and “multiple implications” among metathemes, and that these are just as important as the metathemes themselves. Some scholars, in fact, prefer to think of the results of their research

as consisting of a “fundamental description” (the content of the metathemes) and a “fundamental structure” (the interconnections). It is difficult, however, to establish clearly the boundaries between the two, and many phenomenological researchers are more comfortable with a research result that is expressed in a description of the phenomenon that goes beyond mere summary or recapitulation of themes, but creates a new Gestalt. Interestingly, this outcome can be seen simultaneously as a synthesis and as a reduction. It is a synthesis in the sense that it brings together elements. It is a reduction in the sense that it abstracts to a higher level of generality, stripping away the situational.

How Are Themes and Metathemes Related?

I have described the flow of the researcher’s involvement with her data as a preparatory stage to answering the question: How are themes and metathemes related? They both have their place within the same conceptual activity: the researcher’s effort to make sense of her data. Individual themes are the more substantive entities. They are often expressed in a sentence or a few cryptic statements, such as “conformity is seen as a burden,” or “preparations for eating are made in spite of the resolve not to eat.” Metathemes are the more abstracted entities. At the same time, they are larger than the individual themes. They cannot be compressed into a short phrase. They are usually formulated as a succinct narrative, such as “In successful relationships, the partners . . . are able to express affection and sexuality in a playful manner, and can be uninhibited and child-like with one another” (Daitch, 1979, p. 115). Concrete illustrations, taken from the data, are often added to make a metatheme come alive for the reader.

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Various individual themes may have contributed to a metatheme, yet it would be erroneous to think of the relationship between themes and metathemes as summative. Neither are themes subsumed under a metatheme (as the concept “color” is subsumed under the concept “spectrum”), nor is the relationship a hierarchical one (as the concept “rose” is generically subordinate to the concept “flower”). The relationship is more like that between members of a group and the group as a whole. The members form the group and are part of it. They determine the nature of the group so that statements can be made about the group’s characteristics and dynamics that could not be made if the members were not these particular individuals. Yet the individuals taken one by one do not “add up” to the group. The relationship between themes and metathemes does not have the nature of a logical structure of any kind; it is an associative distillation of meaningful wholes.

In addition, the relationship between themes and metathemes is not characterized by chronological order. Themes do not necessarily appear before metathemes. It is not unusual for a phenomenological

researcher to proceed directly from immersion in the totality of her unstructured data material to a contemplation of the metathemes and patterns. Only after that does she go back to individual documents for “panning” or “surveying.” For the researchers who take this course, what emerges first are the dim outlines of the larger entities; the attention to detail serves to clarify and illustrate.

Do Both Themes and Metathemes “Emerge”?

Here is where this second question can begin to be answered. If metathemes were edifices, and themes were building blocks, the metathemes could be constructed from the themes. Metathemes would not emerge; they would be assembled. As described above, that is not the nature of the relationship between themes and metathemes. Both indeed emerge for the researcher, and they may do so almost in parallel over a period of time. Metathemes can emerge from data holistically. Later, they will become more distinct, and perhaps also more numerous, as the researcher pays attention to individual experiential descriptions, and then shifts again to the whole. The researcher who starts out with individual themes may go back and forth also, gaining perspective for the detail as she contemplates the whole.

The Experience of Emergence

My lengthy introduction and review were necessary to provide a context for the question: “*How* do themes emerge?”, and to locate the places where the “emergence” happens. The description so far has sounded deceptively simple, as if all that is needed is to put into operation certain actions about meaning units, boundaries, categories, commonalities, and so forth. But the metaphors of “panning” and “surveying,” as all metaphors, distort as much as they illuminate. Themes are not as easily distinguished from their surroundings as specks of gold in a pan. They “are not objects one encounters at certain points or moments in the text” (van Manen, 1987). They do not stand out as if they were underlined. Anything in the data could be a theme. And then again, perhaps what one sees is only a mirage. Themes can be elusive; they don’t have the character of definite entities whose discovery depends on nothing more than technique.

My probing into the experience has convinced me that there are at least two necessary conditions for the emergence of themes: The researcher must engage the material she wishes to understand interactively, and she has to bring to the task certain human capacities and she must activate them. Let me talk about these capacities first.

When I asked some accomplished human science researchers to provide me with their experiences and thoughts on emerging themes, I gave them the opportunity to react to three statements I had made.

These statements described briefly the human capacities and processes involved (when these capacities are activated) in the emergence of themes. I called them: (a) a sense-making ability, (b) an order-making ability, and (c) a recognition producing ability. As it turned out, this list was basically confirmed by the respondents, although some individuals identified more strongly with one of the items than with the others, and one person distanced herself from one of the three. I seem to have been on the right track. Before I describe these three human faculties for you, allow me another brief digression.

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I used to be annoyed by a former colleague of mine who proclaimed that all that phenomenological researchers do that is different from traditional research is to go out and find evidence for their hypotheses so they can support them. Nevertheless, it has sometimes struck me as curious that many phenomenological researchers, if asked beforehand, could indeed produce a quite adequate description of what the results of their studies would eventually look like. In a sense, they could have hypothesized them in advance, and seem merely to have received confirmation, illustration, and completion through their data. My colleague, of course, was wrong; but there was an unintended kernel of truth in his remark. Phenomenological researchers, if they are sensible, don't choose topics for investigation about which they know nothing and in which they are not much interested. Most commonly, they study an experience because of its special significance for them. They have become deeply involved with the phenomenon. It is something at the very center of their personal or professional interests, and therefore they know a lot about it at a human level, even before the data are in. That is why metathemes can emerge and be valid before they are actually confirmed by a process of which, by standards of strict logic, they should be the end result.

I have been involved in the process of research and interested in it for a long time. That is, I believe, why my first attempt to articulate the capacities the human science researcher brings to her task was remarkably successful. At the same time, my knowledge was reshaped and broadened, adjusted and enriched by my colleagues who took the time to assist me in my quest for a better understanding of the phenomenon of emerging themes. The formulations introduced below are significantly shaped by them, as a collective improvement on my much weaker original wording.

Human Faculties Activated in the Emergence of Themes

Although I differentiated between three human faculties that are employed in the course of bringing forth themes, their separation from each other is merely a device to help gain a better understanding. The separation is as artificial as the notion of "constituents." There are no clear demarcation lines. However, by shedding light on

one part after the other and describing each as best we can, it is easier to grasp the whole.

I think of the first capacity as a *sense-making ability* or *holistic perception*. At first glance, the two do not seem to be interchangeable. What I seek to convey by equating them is the mind's power to discern the figure against the background. We have the ability to see faces in the abstract pattern of a wall paper, animal shapes in cloud formations, the figure in the tapestry. Dots of the same color among other dots on an optometrist's chart congeal to form the letter B as if they were connected, as if they were linked together in a single form. We seem to have a sometimes almost irrepressible urge to make sense, to discern holistically a Gestalt. When a researcher encounters her material, that massive collection of words, sentences, phrases, and observations could not possibly be dealt with if she were not ready for a sense-making holistic seeing that allows the details to retreat to the background.

The second capacity is an *order-making ability* or *capacity for intellectual organizing*. Our mind allows us to proceed through certain conceptual steps, such as breaking down entities into smaller units, to discriminate and identify. Comparison is probably the most important intellectual tool, because by comparing we can sort things, we can place together those that are similar and keep apart others, thus creating structure. Structure makes the researcher's material more accessible. A "whole protocol cannot be comprehended in a single glance," according to Wertz (1985, p. 165). "Whether implicitly or explicitly, each researcher differentiates his descriptive data" (p. 165). Arranging those parts in a disciplined way "serves as an occasion and a setting" (Fischer)², as a way of "zeroing in" (Weber).

Lastly, there is a *recognition-producing ability* which I also call *intuition*. These two terms may seem incongruent. I connect them through Polanyi's notion of tacit knowing, a knowing that comes from some deeper source inside us. It has to do with what I earlier referred to when explaining how researchers discover metathemes in their material without having arrived at them by a discernible process. They know "intuitively." As I learned in my own life to trust my intuition, I realized that I have the strongest intuitive insights in situations that have become familiar to me. I could tell, for instance, which person would turn out to become a successful doctoral student within the first fifteen or twenty minutes of a conversation—after ten years of working with adult doctoral students. I had learned something that was not intellectually available to me. It was not reflected, and perhaps cannot be processed, in a rational way. It was knowledge that I possessed but could not articulate or explain. The phenomenological researcher must bring into play the intuitive knowing that senses what is there. It grows out of a pre-reflective familiarity with the experience, and in this sense it is re-cognition.

Paradoxically, this intuitive recognizing produces new insights, as it “brings the sensed into perceptual clarity” (Fischer). (The German word for recognition is *erkennen*, which in turn can be translated also as insight or understanding.)

To reiterate, then: For themes to emerge, the researcher has to activate certain faculties. Depending on where she is in the flow of activities called analysis, her power to make sense, to create order, to recognize, has to become engaged. This engagement begins as she initially encounters her material at the first interview or observation, and continues into the phase of writing the final description. At any given moment one or the other of these mental processes may be in the foreground; all three seem to be necessary. The successful researcher allows all of them to function, purposely relying on them and trusting them.

Interaction with the Data

I had defined two conditions for the emergence of themes: The researcher activates certain powers, and she interacts dynamically with her material. From the descriptions I studied, it became quite clear that themes will not emerge unless there is engagement. This is expressed already at the data collection phase in a special kind of careful listening and concentrated attention. It carries over into the actual work with the text material, where it takes on the character of an active interaction, as if the data were another dynamic entity. “I question the data, and the data question me” (Weber) is how one researcher describes this interaction. “What is the existential question to which this story is an answer? What is the realm of meaning that the data tend to conceal as they reveal themselves?” (Aoki) are some of the questions a researcher may pose. The process is “dialogic”; it is an act of “imaginative participation” (Mook).

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While the researcher is “anticipating, planning, looking” (Fischer), carefully listening (Aoki) and actively searching, there is, at the same time, no compulsiveness about the process—just openness. Nothing is forced. Some scholars use the phrase “playing with the data” (Mook). In fact, most experienced researchers have come to realize that there is also a need to get away from the data. They purposely “tune out” or “look away” for a while. If their engagement in the analysis is deep enough, a part of them stays in touch with it, even when their consciousness is not directed toward this task. Insights sometimes surface at unexpected moments—when taking a shower, cooking dinner, jogging, driving the car, before falling asleep, in waking up, or at dull meetings. Some people set aside quiet times without preoccupation, doing “an activity that allows undirected rumination” (Fischer)—just doodling, or walking on a beach, through a forest, in a park, aimlessly wandering through a shopping mall, watching birds, playing with pets—and these times may be productive, or they may not be. There are no expectations.

One important piece of advice that experienced researchers have for the novice is to be patient (Weber), and to “tolerate anxiety and ambiguity” (Marshall, 1981, p. 397). Phenomenological analysis can’t be done on a schedule. Insights don’t come, and themes don’t emerge because the researcher has checked off items on a “to do” list. Reflection, readiness, openness, immersion are states more than they are actions, and they need to be sustained.

Closure

How, then, will the researcher know when her research has come to a conclusion? If there is no list of steps to go through, how will she know that she is finished? Some scholars answer this question in terms of saturation, that is, when nothing new can be added. But there is another aspect to it. Just as the researcher knows that what emerges is, in fact, a valid theme, she also may be able to know whether her final description of the phenomenon is yet a valid one. The entire experience is a “trial and error process of . . . decision making” (Chapman). Have I worded this theme correctly? Is this what the respondent really means? Do these concepts belong together? Have I accurately captured the sense of the theme? In fact, did these themes *emerge*, or did I make them up? Question after question is begging for an answer.

The answers are never definite. Their validity depends to a large degree on the researcher’s own situation and ability. As I mentioned earlier, researchers usually choose a topic for study that is important to them. There is also a sense in which it can be too important. If the issue under study is not merely of interest, but a personal predicament, researchers might undertake their projects in order to deal with that personal problem. Research becomes a form of therapy. Rather than applying herself to the research in an act of giving, the researcher is fulfilling her own needs. Perhaps no researcher is totally free from such want; the greater the need, however, the smaller the likelihood that the researcher’s answers will be more than just her personal images.

To a certain degree, the researcher must be a “seer,”³ a “sage” with the self-denial inherent in that state of being, if she expects to be blessed with insights that carry her beyond personal understanding. At least she has to be ready to examine her own needs when faced with the questions that invariably arise during the involvement with her data.

If the researcher is able to accept the attitude of a genuine seeker, she can begin to trust her intuition, her power to recognize. Researchers report incidents in which they know that they *know*. There is a deep feeling of satisfaction when things are right. Sometimes a respondent has used words to express an experience that suddenly strike the searching researcher as “just right.” The researcher can actually feel when she is “in touch,” or when tentative

ideas “solidify.” Uneasiness, hesitation, suspicion give way to confidence, trust, and a sense of gratification when the theme is discovered or when the search has ended, when the task is done.

Discovering themes and metathemes is at the core of the phenomenological researcher’s analytic activity. It is a process full of paradoxes. The researcher has to be informed and naive, experienced and fresh, engaged and distanced, focused and open, pushy and patient, all at the same time. She must activate her powers sometimes to the point of exhaustion, while she also needs to be playful and relaxed. It almost seems too forbidding and confusing a task for anyone to undertake. Yet those researchers who have done it not only feel amply rewarded, but they know it can be accomplished. Sometimes it can be very difficult. On the other hand, there is also a level on which it is easy. Themes emerge when “you are interested in the world of your informants and willing to reflect on their everyday lives” (Barritt), when “you start living with your project” (Heshusius), when “your interest is deep enough” (Heshusius). Thus the concluding advice of one of the most seasoned phenomenological researchers to the novice is not to become obsessed with doubts and questions, but to jump in there and begin, because “it isn’t worth worrying about before-hand” (Barritt).

Notes

1. Terms in this paper that are enclosed in quotation marks were used in at least one of the sources I drew on. They are not individually referenced, because most of them appear more than once in any given source, and often they appear in several sources. Therefore, the reference information would be too bulky and disruptive.
2. When names appear in this paper without reference to a publication, the material quoted comes from the data collected directly by the author from the following respondents: Ted Aoki (University of Alberta), Loren Barritt (University of Michigan), Don Chapman (University of Alberta), Scott Churchill (University of Dallas), Constance Fischer (Pittsburgh Assessment and Consultation Center), Lous Heshusius (York University), Richard Hycner (California School of Professional Psychology), Steinar Kvale (University of Aarhus), Max van Manen (University of Alberta), Bertha Mook (University of Ottawa), Sandra Weber (University of Alberta).
3. van Manen, personal communication.

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