Evolving Reflexive Thematic Analysis in Knowledge Management Research

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Abstract: This paper presents a novel approach to the coding practices of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). The paper offers a working sample from a study exploring Knowledge-sharing (KS) intentions and behaviours of employees within a non-profit organisation. It is claimed that foundational coding practices inform analysts about the creation of reflexive codes. Referred to as 'the coding family', these methodological practices provide a set of conceptual tools that underscore the iterative and dynamic nature of qualitative data analysis. All of which culminate in theme generation. The paper focuses on the iterative and flexible approach that leads to the development of themes. Significantly, the paper presents an understanding of the organisational ecosystem by introducing what is termed 'Axial Connections'. These axial connections highlight the dynamic nature of organisational constructs that influence employee KS intentions and behaviour. Twelve axial connections are derived from and generated by the coding family practices illustrated within this paper. The rationale behind this evolved approach is to attempt to reconcile Braun and Clarke's playful cry to "be reflexive, be be reflexive!" as it continues to be a cause of concern for novice researchers and experienced academics. **T**he method provided aims to ensure that the analytical process remains aligned with the 'guidelines' of RTA. It is proposed that the analytical method of interpreting and understanding data begins with acknowledging the emotional connection a participant has towards a given interview question. As part of the coding family, emotions convey different meanings, leading to different interpretations. Additionally, values coding and In-Vivo coding represent valid members that ultimately lead to interpretive reflexive coding. Values coding relates to the participants' worldviews, portraying the values participants hold towards various experiences. Values are fundamentally connected to emotions, and emotions are deeply connected to values. Conversely, In-Vivo or verbatim coding is considered acceptable, as it can convey meaning that aligns with that of the researcher. By providing a foundational coding approach, this paper aims to reduce the ambiguity surrounding coding within the School of RTA. Notably, the working example demonstrates how the 12 axial connections interact with one another to influence the KS intentions and behaviour of the employee. Finally, it will be shown how the employees perceive the axial connections in different ways, resulting in different outcomes towards their willingness to KS.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Braun and Clarke, Knowledge Sharing, Organisational Ecosystem

1. Introduction

"Be a thoughtful researcher, do not just slavishly follow what methodology writers say…we provide a compass and a map to navigate your adventure," are words offered for consideration for the novice researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2021b, p. 343-344). While RTA is considered flexible and inviting to the novice researcher or indeed that of any researcher seeking to explore lived experiences, Braun and Clarke became somewhat perplexed in how their RTA method of analysis is conducted, see Braun and Clarke (2021b) for their 10-problem critique and Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 591) regarding their "we assumed most people would 'get it', would understand our assumptions. How wrong we were!" rhetoric. This paper addresses some of these perplexities by presenting a working example of RTA. It is suggested that there is a need to step back from consideration of what is reflexive coding and ask, "How am I getting to present this reflexive code?"

This research utilises coding practices set out by Saldaña (2016). The study does not reject Braun and Clarke's reflexive TA; instead, it proposes enriching the analytical approach. It is suggested that the analytical process begins with acknowledging the emotional connection and the values attached to a participant's emotions towards a given interview question or topic. Emotions convey different meanings for different participants and therefore result in different interpretations. Additionally, emotions are intertwined with values, and values are intertwined with emotions as they connect with the inner cognitive scheme of participants (Saldaña, 2016; Kouamé and Liu, 2021). Additionally, the analysis remains open to In-Vivo coding, as the interpretation of participant responses can mirror that of the researcher's cognitive horizon of understanding (Braun and Clarke, 2012). RTA, unknowingly, supports the use of emotion coding when discussing how, during the first phase of RTA, participants "orient themselves to questions" and recognise "the different emotional responses to the research topic" (Terry *et al.*, 2017, p.29). Braun and Clarke also acknowledge the need to recognise the emotional impact that phase one, familiarisation, has on a researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2021a). Finally, as the coding

family develops, it is maintained that there are dynamic constructs influencing how and why employees share their knowledge. This research offers 12 dynamic influential constructs, referred to as 'axial connection'. These axial connections illustrate the frenetic nature of the organisational ecosystem. Each axial connection is influenced by and has an influence on employee KS intentions and behaviour. Likewise, it is philosophically and theoretically posited that each participant influences the intentions and behaviour of other employees.

2. The Coding Family Within Qualitative Research and Data Analysis

The focus of qualitative methodology is multi-paradigmatic and multi-method, acknowledging the researcher's role in investigating participants' experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts on a specific area of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 1982). Data analysis is predicated on the reflexive, iterative process that necessitates reconsidering initial concepts and developing novel interpretations that address the research question regarding what influences employees' KS intentions and behaviour. The methodology adopted to answer this requires the researcher to…

> …be a good [craftsperson]: avoid any rigid set of procedures [and] let every [researcher] be [their] own methodologist; let every [researcher] be [their] own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft
>
> (Rolfe, 2011, p. 115)

The quote above exemplifies the approach to RTA within this paper and echoes Braun and Clarke's PhD supervisor, who states that "qualitative research is about fun, play and creativity" (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 592). To that end, this research viewed the process of RTA as "a starting point for [my] journey, [and] not a map" to be rigorously followed (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2022, p. 424). As such, this research presents how, through the application of three coding practices, the stage of reflexive coding is ultimately developed, thereby completing the coding family process. See Figure 1: The Coding Family.

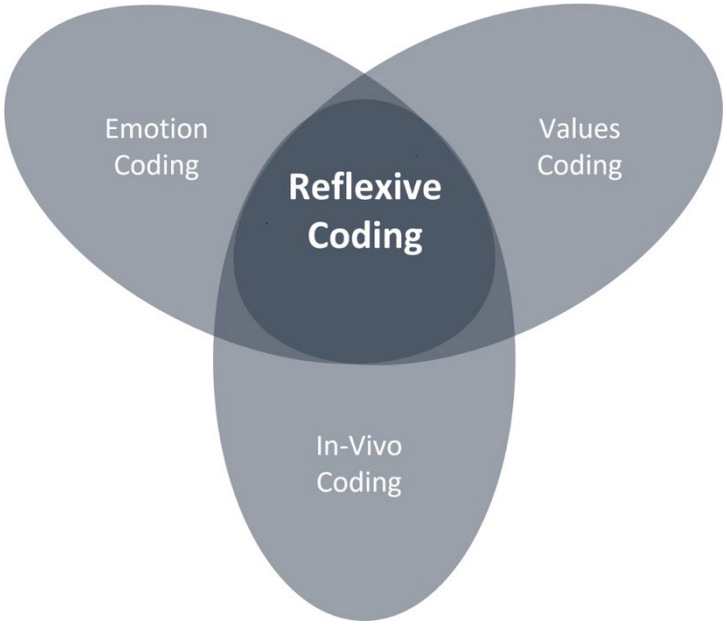

Figure 1: The coding family

3. Emotion, Values and In-vivo Coding in Practice

Emotions portray the intentionality of an action; that is, the emotions shown by the participants provide an added, nuanced understanding of the spoken word. In other words, emotional intentionality affects employees' emotional connection to the outside world (Goldie, 2002; Ratcliffe, 2019). The use of emotion coding is seen as an "affective method" of using the researcher's subjectivity to embrace naturalistic motives and reactions (Saldaña, 2016, p. 124). Saldaña (2016) continues to argue that emotion coding is beneficial when "exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences and actions, especially in matters of social relationships, reasoning, decision-making, judgment, and risk taking" (Saldaña, 2016, p.125). Significantly, different emotions can offer

different interpretations and meanings manifested through the facial expressions and tone of a participant (Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Keltner, 2019) that the researcher observes during the interview and data collection process. Participants' body language, and in some cases, facial expressions, provide implicit inferences attached to the spoken word (Zhou and Tingqin, 2008; Yeong *et al.*, 2018). By observing the participants and my emotional responses, a deeper interpretation and understanding of the data is realised (Braun and Clarke, 2021a).

Values are fundamentally connected to emotions, and emotions are fundamentally connected to values (Conte, Hahnel and Brosch, 2023). Values coding involves first-round coding that relates to the participants' worldviews and portrays the values and beliefs of participants and how they consider their intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). The use of values coding proved beneficial in understanding the values participants held concerning the sharing of knowledge within this community-based service provider.

Figure 2: Emotion and values coding in practice provides an example of how the analysis begins by identifying the emotional attachment the participant has towards a given topic, while also presenting the values the participant holds concerning the provided answer. The researcher creates the emotion code titles based on works by Susanto et al. (2020) and Keltner and Cowen (2021). The participant portrayed a sense of eagerness while answering the question, which implies that one of their values is to seek out opportunities to help other colleagues. This interpretation of holding the value to assist others comes from the totality of the interview. The analyst develops an appreciation for who the participant is and what they have a sense of.

Interview data	Emotion Coding	Values coding	Interpretive reflexive coding	Axial connection
It's probably in a way opportunistic because something will crop up…lot of…when did you send that? Where did you send the referral to?	**Eager**	**Opportunity to help others**	Wanting to give as much assistance as possible	Organisational commitment

Figure 2: Emotion and values coding in practice

To illustrate In-vivo coding and its justification in its usage, a sample from another participant is provided. Somewhat controversially, this research posits that In-vivo coding can and should be utilised in the creation of reflexive codes. In Vivo coding or "verbatim coding" requires the researcher to take a word or phrase directly from data (Given, 2008; Saldaña, 2016, p. 105). While placing the researcher "front and center" of the analysis, there is also a fusion of horizons between that of the participant and the researcher (Gadamer, 2004; Braun and Clarke, 2021a, p. 9). This fusion can instil a commonality of interpretation regarding how a participant interprets a research question and how the interpreter understands the meaning of the interview. Figure 3: In-vivo coding in practice offers a sample from another participant's response to a question related to being asked to share knowledge with other employees.

Interview data	Emotion Coding	In-vivo coding	Interpretive reflexive coding	Axial connection
It actually felt nice. I felt **honoured and privileged** that they asked me	Pride	**Honoured and privileged**	Having a sense of belonging	Professional Identity

Figure 3: In-vivo coding in practice

The above coding family leads the researcher towards the development of the reflexive code, as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3: Emotion and values coding in practice and In-vivo coding in practice. The examples also provide a snapshot of how interpretive reflexive coding generates the axial connections. The above examples illustrate two of the twelve axial connections: organisational commitment and professional identity. These are generated by the researcher's interpretation of data and the link that the interpretive reflexive code has towards each participant. In building this scaffolding of understanding, this research offers a deeper insight into how participants perceive reality in diverse ways. What one participant sees as a positive might be viewed as a negative for another: hence, the dynamic nature of the axial connections. It is acknowledged that due to the

limitations of this paper, Section 4. Axial connection cannot provide illustrations for each of the twelve axial connections. Instead, a succinct profile is provided, accompanied by commentary based on the data. This will enable the reader to gain a comprehensive understanding of the influential constructs of the axial connections while presenting their dynamic nature.

4. Reflexivity, Axial Connections and the Coding Family

To be reflexive requires the researcher to present "fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception" (Gadamer, 1988, p. 232; Heidegger, 2010, p. 146). Fore-having is the immersion into data, fore-sight offers assumptions of immersion, and fore-conception is the creation of meaning from data that is presented through scientific endeavours (Gadamer, 2004; Warnke, 2011; Tomkins and Eatough, 2018). To be reflexive means to continuously enter into the sphere of conscious self-awareness and take ownership of the perspectives towards that self-awareness (Rennie, 2004; Braun and Clarke, 2021a). In doing so, the current research develops assumptions regarding data, incorporating reflexivity into the reflections to address these assumptions and generate new meanings consciously so that knowledge creation intersects at what Gadamer would refer to as the 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 2004).

Following the introduction of the coding family and their interrelationship in the creation of reflexive codes, this research suggests that the organisational ecosystem is comprised of twelve axial connections that influence and are influenced by the employee. As illustrated in Figure 4: Axial connections and employee interaction within the organisational ecosystem, the twelve axial connections represent the subjective understanding of what the reflexive code is saying about what constructs influence the KS intentions and behaviours of employees within this community-based service provider.

For this paper, axial connections are defined as dynamic, influential constructs that revolve around the participant. They influence participants' KS intentions and behaviour, but are also shaped by participants' interactions with other participants within the organisation. It is a vibrant system comparable to that professed by the bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006; Coscioni *et al.*, 2018). Axial connections are viewed as "systems characterised by frenetic activity…due to high levels of ambient stimulation" (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000, p.121). They are derived from the reflexive interpretation of data that centres on and permeates participants' experiences related to KS. Each employee engages with the axial connections in a distinct manner. Consequently, employees exhibit varying intentions and behaviours towards KS, contingent upon their perception of the impact of each axial connection.

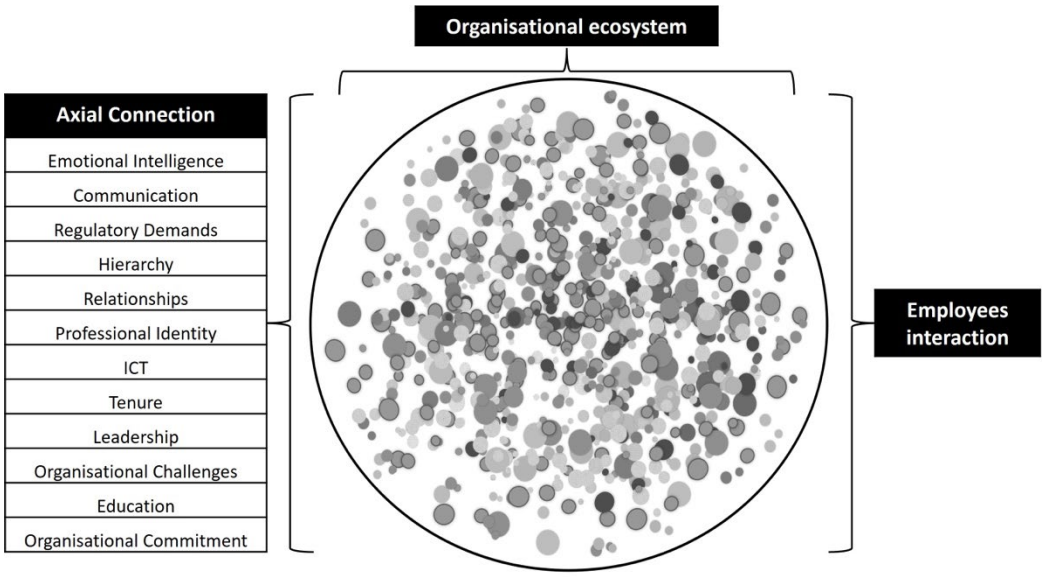

Figure 4: Axial connections and employee interaction within the organisational ecosystem

In summary, data analysis techniques utilising the coding family serve not only as systematic procedures for interpreting this complex contextual data but also as critical tools for generating meaningful insights in the shape of axial connections. Through such methods, RTA researchers can expedite underlying patterns, relationships, and meanings of participants' experiences. These techniques support the interpretation of raw qualitative data,

guiding it toward coherent findings. Such findings contribute to theoretical development, practical understanding, and contextualised interpretations of knowledge sharing (KS) within community-based service providers. The axial connections (summarised below) are outcomes of 'the coding family' practices in this evolved RTA, which tell a story of the KS intentions and behaviours of the employees within this community-based service provider.-

4.1 Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence facilitates empathetic engagement, supports perspective-taking, and enhances relational depth. Individuals with high emotional intelligence exhibit a greater propensity to share, particularly in emotionally complex situations such as the pandemic. They possess the ability to intuit others' readiness to receive knowledge and adjust their approach accordingly. Emotional intelligence fosters both self-awareness and social connection, creating an environment where knowledge sharing feels safe and affirming. However, regulatory structures often constrain the full expression of emotional intelligence, resulting in suppressed authenticity.

4.2 Communication

Communication functions as the conduit for knowledge exchange, influenced by both the speaker's articulation and the listener's capacity to absorb information. Effective communication necessitates emotional intelligence, cognitive awareness, and contextual adaptability. Challenges arise from jargon-laden discourse, disparities in ICT skills, and individual communication preferences. Informal channels (e.g., corridor conversations) are deemed essential for sharing tacit knowledge. Participants observed that when mutual understanding is absent, messages may be misinterpreted or rejected, thereby inhibiting collaborative learning.

4.3 Regulatory Demands

Increased regulation restricts autonomy and impedes the sharing of tacit knowledge. Participants expressed apprehension about "stepping outside their lane," with concerns regarding GDPR, liability, and disciplinary action stifling open communication. Protocols prioritize compliance over innovation, diminishing employees' willingness to offer assistance or ideas. While regulation ensures safety and standardization, it paradoxically undermines the very ethos of care that many participants aspire to uphold. This creates tension between policy adherence and human connection.

4.4 Hierarchy

Perceptions of hierarchy strongly influence KS intentions and behaviour within this community-based service provider. Hierarchy is seen as both necessary for regulatory control and problematic when it inhibits employee interaction. Participants describe "silo mentalities" in which disciplines protect their domains, thereby stifling cross-disciplinary knowledge engagement. Participants report feeling dismissed or undervalued based on their tenure, discipline, or education, which can lead to a perceived sense of ostracism. One participant recounted having their academic input rejected. Another participant observes, "they'd walk over a basic grade person to go to a principal," signalling a lack of respect across roles. This "pulling rank" approach discourages open dialogue and reduces KS. Conversely, participants expressed hope for change, citing improved connection and leadership efforts. Still, many recognise that hierarchy remains a barrier to fulfilling needs like autonomy and relatedness.

4.5 Relationships

Relationships are fundamental to effective knowledge sharing. Participants emphasised that mutual respect, trust, and a sense of belonging facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge and soft skills. However, fluctuating team dynamics, staff turnover, and hybrid work models impede the development of deep connections. The presence of hierarchical thinking and cross-disciplinary misunderstandings exacerbates this issue. Nonetheless, participants expressed a desire for meaningful work relationships and communities of practice, where sharing becomes an organic and collaborative process. Emotional codes such as 'regret' and 'hope' reveal the emotional labour underpinning workplace relationships.

4.6 Professional Identity

Professional identity significantly influences individuals' perceptions of their roles and their propensity to share knowledge. Some participants encountered difficulties in articulating their roles due to ambiguous or misunderstood professional boundaries, while others experienced a lack of confidence or external validation. Age, experience, and educational background play crucial roles in shaping a professional identity, which can occasionally result in power dynamics. A secure professional identity promotes openness, whereas ambiguity may lead to withdrawal. Barriers related to identity intersect with hierarchy, tenure, and perceptions of leadership, often reinforcing knowledge silos.

4.7 Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

The rapid transition to ICT prompted by the pandemic disrupted traditional methods of knowledge sharing. Platforms such as Zoom, webinars, and WhatsApp supplanted informal conversations, yet many participants perceived these tools as impersonal and less effective. Younger staff adapted swiftly, whereas older employees faced challenges with digital literacy, exacerbating generational divides. ICT emerged as both a necessity and a barrier, particularly for sharing tacit knowledge, which depends on relational cues and unstructured dialogues. Digital tools alone cannot replicate the richness of in-person interactions.

4.8 Tenure

Tenure exerts a complex influence on KS intentions and behaviour. Long-serving employees often exhibit resistance to new ideas, as illustrated by a dismissive response to a newcomer's suggestion: “You’ve been here five minutes.” This fosters an “us vs. them” mindset and reinforces cultural silos. While tenure can instil the emotion of confidence and pride, it also risks internalised ageism and discomfort with evolving new technologies. For new staff, enthusiasm and a desire to belong drive KS. Tenure also intersects with competence and organisational commitment, with experienced staff often regarded as repositories of valuable knowledge. However, hierarchical constraints and fear of overstepping roles limit open exchange.

4.9 Leadership

Leadership plays a pivotal role in cultivating a culture that promotes KS. Supportive leaders who model openness and empathy foster a sense of psychological safety. Participants appreciated when leaders acknowledged emotional and cognitive needs, offering intuitive and compassionate responses. However, a perceived disconnect between management and frontline staff, exacerbated by hybrid models, limited relational interaction. Leadership that prioritises targets over people can unintentionally silence voices and weaken relational cohesion, thereby impacting the flow of knowledge.

4.10 Organisational Challenges

Post-pandemic realities have reshaped workplace dynamics. Hybrid models have reduced face-to-face interaction, and ICT overload has eroded relational depth, diminishing KS intentions and behaviour, particularly knowledge that comes from the tacit dimension. Staff turnover disrupts continuity, complicating the building of relatedness within the organisation. Regulatory pressures and systemic challenges, such as the cost of living, compound the problem, affecting morale and motivation for KS. Many participants expressed nostalgia for the pre-pandemic informality and frustration with the current constraints, highlighted by an increase in regulatory demands, underscoring the impact of systemic forces on interpersonal exchanges.

4.11 Education

Education serves as a dual-faceted instrument. While it can bolster confidence, pride and competence, it may also incite feelings of resentment or exclusion. Participants possessing academic qualifications reported experiencing isolation. Responses such as “put up or shut up” discouraged further KS contributions. Conversely, experiential knowledge was occasionally prioritised over formal education, leading to demographic divides. One participant discusses how “young staff members” have degrees yet are only at the “L plate level” of understanding the care of others. Additionally, there is a sense that specific disciplines use “fancy words,” which limits interactions between disciplines, as those workers “wouldn’t necessarily speak that language.”

4.12 Organisational Commitment

Commitment to the organisation enhances knowledge-sharing behaviours. Employees who feel valued, empowered, and connected are more likely to support one another and invest in the collective success of the organisation. Recognition, positive feedback, and alignment with the organisation's mission contribute to this sense of commitment. However, high turnover, rigid structures, and hierarchical barriers diminish emotional investment. When staff perceive that their contributions are neither acknowledged nor appreciated, their commitment and, consequently, their willingness to share knowledge, decline.

5. Conclusion

This paper advances RTA research by incorporating three well-established coding practices: emotion coding, values coding and In-vivo coding into a coding family. This coding family improves the rigour and trustworthiness of RTA coding practices by providing insight into how analysts can generate reflexive codes. Additionally, through conducting, in particular, emotion and values coding, this research believes that it will reduce the ambiguity surrounding Braun and Clarke's apparent frustration and alleviate their feelings of "we were wrong" in their discussions of how to conduct RTA coding (Braun, Clarke and Hayfield, 2022, p.428). This paper demonstrates the real value of the dynamic constructs of the axial connections created from 'the coding family'. In doing so, the research can provide greater depth of understanding of the KS intentions and behaviours of the employees within this community-based service provider. The method demonstrated in this paper offers a solid foundational practice that brings value to understanding the ecosystem of an organisation by providing meaningful insights into data related to KS.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from TU Dublin, Research Ethics Committee, ensuring that all procedures complied with established ethical standards

AI Declaration

Paperpal was used the same way as Grammarly—just to check sentence structure. No AI was used for any information produced or in the research outcomes.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on the purpose, procedures, risks, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no known conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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