



# A guide to qualitative analysis

Version 1, October 2021



## Introduction

This guidance was produced as part of a broader project that aims at enhancing competencies of [Terre des Hommes \(Tdh\)](#) staff in qualitative data collection and analysis. It is enrooted in a vision that includes a commitment to improving the quality and use of data collected as part of project management for better learning, project steering and accountability towards the children and the communities.

The use of qualitative methods is increasingly re-encouraged in our sector: both for their relevance when it comes to exploring a new situation, or measuring change in relation to behavior, perception or psychosocial status, as well as for their potential in terms of quality and accountability (stakeholders' empowerment, richness and complexity of information and learning work). Qualitative methods are particularly relevant to understand children's views, opinions, experiences, as they are more adapted to children's cognitive and emotional evolving capacities. They also allow for generating nuanced and rich data necessary for triangulation and robust analysis in combination with quantitative data.

But for busy humanitarian and development practitioners, often trained on the development of quantitative indicators, statistical analysis, and quantitative data visualization, rigorous **qualitative** data analysis can remain a challenge. How to make sense of hundreds of pages of transcript or video recording? How to mitigate bias and subjectivity? How to build a rationale and use qualitative data? We hope that this short guidance developed in partnership with [inFocus Consulting Ltd](#) - which complements a set of training materials - will raise the confidence of staff in conducting qualitative analysis.

# Telling a story with data

When we talk about **'data'** we are referring to facts and figures that relay something specific, but are not organised in some way.

**Data analysis** refers to working with the data to understand what it is telling us and to 'tell a story' (a story with evidence sitting behind it - like a well-sourced non-fiction history book).

## Types of data: qualitative vs quantitative

We can use different types of data to tell a story, for example, using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data. Each type of data includes it's own characteristics as shown in the table below.

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Data type	Number-based	Text-based or using images
How collected	E.g. collected through closed questions in surveys	E.g. collected using interviews, focus groups, open questions in surveys
Sample group	Tend to be larger and can be selected randomly	Tend to be smaller, selected intentionally
How can it help?	Helps to look at scale and prevalence – e.g. how much, how many, how strong.	Helps to dig deeper and describe a situation, can help to explore 'why' and 'how' questions. Can help uncover new learning and lends itself to more creative methods that can engage 'hard to reach' audiences.

## Taking a mixed method approach

Quantitative and qualitative data can be generated from a variety of sources. In this training we look at data you use for **writing a study** (e.g. an evaluation, research etc.). Data could come from a range of sources, for example: surveys, focus groups, interviews, observation, forms, or more creative methods (e.g. art, photography, drama).

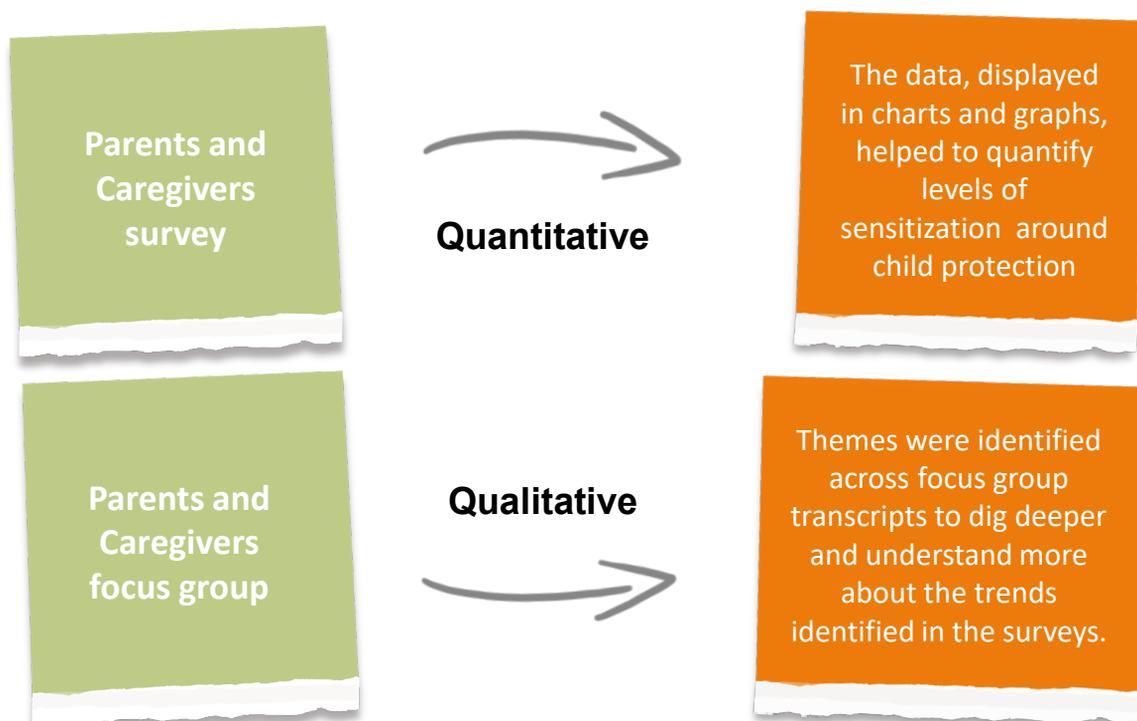
“A **mixed methods** study combines quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis in one study. Individually, these approaches can answer different questions, so combining them can provide you with more in-depth findings. In general, quantitative data is better at answering questions like ‘what is the effect of your digital product?’ and qualitative data can show how and why you got these results.”

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/mixed-methods-study>

Bringing together quantitative and qualitative data is a form of **triangulation**, which helps to validate data through analysing data from different sources. Analysing qualitative data can help to dig deeper and explore quantitative findings, digging deeper into how and why things occurred as they did.

## Different approaches to analysis

When using a mixed method approach, we are combining different types of data, collected in different ways. We therefore take a different approach to the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. In our example below for a project related to protection issues around children affected by a crisis evaluators looked at the following question **To what extent are community members sensitized around child protection concerns to mitigate risks faced by children within their communities?** In the rest of this manual, we focus on the specific steps for **qualitative analysis**.



# Before you start your qualitative analysis....

Before you start your analysis we are going to look at three areas that we recommend you think about before starting analysis:

1. Inductive and deductive approaches
2. Data quality
3. Analysis bias

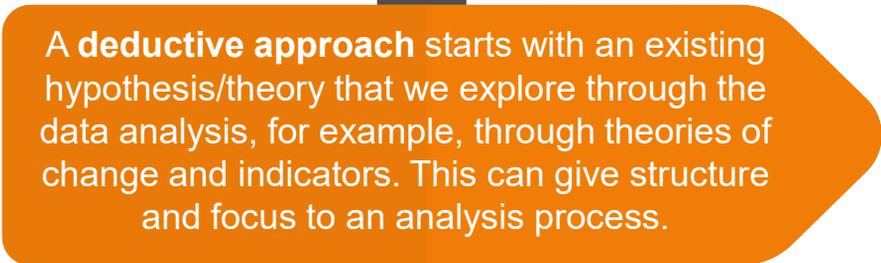
## 1. Inductive vs deductive

When conducting qualitative analysis it is also important to think about whether to take an **inductive** or **deductive** approach to analysis.

At Tdh we focus on more taking a deductive approach as a starting point for our analysis, starting with a log-frame, theory of change, and or study questions that guide what we are expecting to see in the data. However, it is still important to let the data 'tell its story' and be open to a more inductive approach as you go through your analysis and be open to unexpected findings. Later in the guide we look at how you might practically apply an inductive or deductive approach to the different qualitative analysis steps.



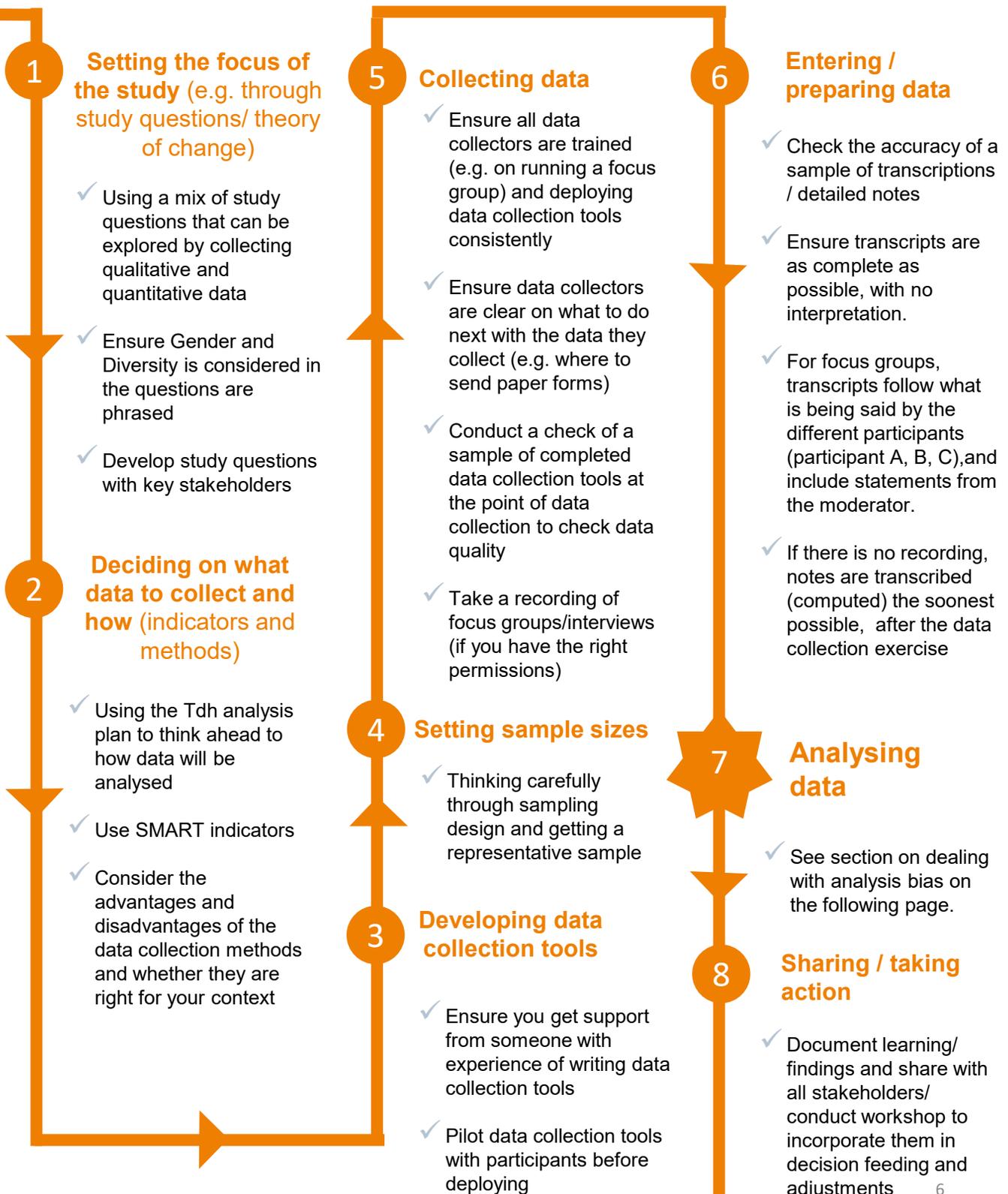
An **inductive approach** involves coming to the analysis without preconceived ideas of what the data will be likely to show, and letting the data tell its own story.



A **deductive approach** starts with an existing hypothesis/theory that we explore through the data analysis, for example, through theories of change and indicators. This can give structure and focus to an analysis process.

## 2. Data quality

It is really important to ensure your data is of sufficient quality before conducting analysis. Data quality can be impacted across the process of developing a study, and there are a variety of steps you can take to address this, as we explore below:



### 3. Analysis bias

Conducting thematic analysis is, by its nature, a subjective process that is reliant on the judgement of the analyst in identifying themes in the data in front of them. We now look at some of the different ways that **bias** can enter into the thematic analysis process in the table below.

It is important to note that there are a wide range of different biases that can affect data analysis and definitions overlap. If you want to get into more detail on this topic **acaps** produce some clear guidance on different types of analysis bias in their resources [here](#) and [here](#).

	Confirmation bias	Social bias	Process bias	Institutional bias
What is it?	The analyst is influenced by what <i>they expect or want</i> to see from the data. They could be influenced by data that supports their own hypothesis.	The analysis is affected by the analysts perception of who has provided the information.	Prioritising some information in the analysis process based on the characteristics / order of the data.	Interpreting data in line with an organisation's views or ways of working.
Example	E.g. the analyst inadvertently looks for patterns in the data that show that indicators have been achieved, as this is what they expect to happen.	E.g. prioritising opinions that are held by the majority in society, placing more emphasis on the views of respondents from a similar background	E.g. relying too heavily on a particular piece of information, often information that emerges early in the process, or focusing on responses that are more clearly worded	E.g. neglecting findings that are emerging as they don't fit with existing understanding or ways of working in an organisation
Questions to ask	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there a particular direction I want the analysis to go in/a story I want it to tell me?</li> <li>How strong is the evidence for the conclusions we are making from the data?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is my perception of the individuals providing the data? Is this influencing the way that I'm looking at the data?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Am I treating the responses I'm analysing equally?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do findings challenge existing views within my organisation?</li> </ul>

## Avoiding analysis bias...

There are a number of steps you can take to avoid analysis bias, we include 5 of these steps in the post-its below:

Constantly challenge your own perception during analysis and set aside time to reflect and ask if there is really evidence to back up your findings.

It is important to respect what the data is telling you.

Never assume that any social fact, perception or relation is 'neutral'

(which means it would be totally free of preconceptions and power dynamics).

Verify results, either internally within Tdh (e.g. with staff) or with external stakeholders (e.g. participants or community members).

Ensure groups are representative/ diverse.

Disaggregate / transcribe all data by sex (and along other lines as relevant in your context: gender identity and expression, age, disability, level of education, etc.)

Check results against quantitative data as part of a mixed method approach.

Are there similar trends showing up?

# Qualitative analysis steps: thematic Analysis

There are many different ways of conducting qualitative analysis. In this guide we focus on one particular method: **thematic analysis**.

Thematic analysis includes a number of steps that help you to work through the data. We will be going through these steps in more detail, and working through examples, in detail in the next session. The steps are based on [Using thematic analysis in psychology: Qualitative Research](#) by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke.

Thematic analysis can also be supported through the use of [specialist software](#), such as MAXQDA and NVivo. Across the steps in this guide we focus on a smaller data asset that could be analysed with spreadsheet software or by hand.

- 1 Familiarising yourself with the data
- 2 Developing codes
- 3 Searching for themes
- 4 Reviewing themes
- 5 Pulling it all together – writing your narrative

## Step1: Familiarising yourself with the data

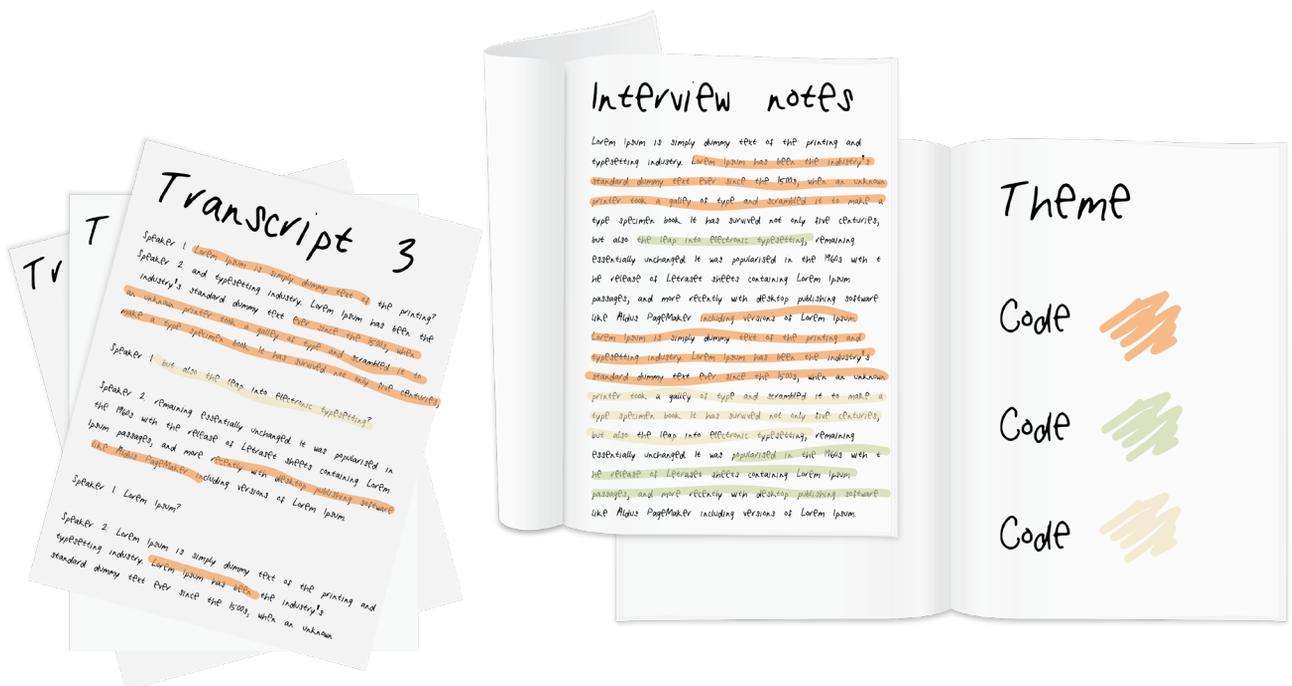
- The first step is to get to know your data better by reading (and re-reading) through all of your transcripts or detailed notes.
- It can already be helpful to jot down notes about patterns emerging in the data.
- If you are taking a deductive approach, this is also a good point to review your theory of change and indicators.



“Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.”  
**Abraham Lincoln** (possibly)

## Step 2: Developing codes

- Codes are **an initial list of what in the data is interesting** – they are a description rather than an interpretation: "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" Richard Boyatzis, *Transforming qualitative information* (1998), p. 63.
- At this stage, we want to be thorough and **highlight anything that jumps out as interesting**. You do not need to code every piece of text.
- Codes are more numerous and specific than themes, and **extracts can be coded more than once**.
- As described previously, we can take an **inductive (data) driven or deductive (theory driven) approach** to developing codes. For example, if you are using indicators they can be a useful guide on what indicators to look for.
- It is **okay to change your codes as you go**, replacing or rewording previous codes, or grouping them together to keep to a manageable number.
- You then need **to group the different extracts** from the data under the different codes.



Modified from [How to do thematic analysis — Delve \(delvetool.com\)](https://delvetool.com/).

In our example below, we have coded an extract for survey data from the question: **In your opinion are boys, as a group, excluded from any services (e.g. health, education, protection, recreation... etc.) in your community? Please explain your answer.**

<p>One thing we see in the community is that boys often leave school at 11 years old to go to work, therefore in my opinion, boys can be excluded from attending schools, even if they want to attend. There is a lack of awareness within families on the importance of education.</p>	<p>Since the Syrian crisis, many boys within Syrian families get married early, with some getting married from the age of 15, which stops them attending school or taking part in recreational activities. There can also be resistance from families to these young people accessing school as they are expected by their families to earn money and support their wife.</p>	<p>I feel that boys are not as likely to access services, particularly services that focus on child protection, and therefore it is not expected by their parents, families and wider community that they actually need this support. Where there is support, I don't think that it is very well promoted as community members I speak to don't always know what their children can access.</p>	<p>Sometimes I feel that when boys talk about an issues they face, it's often dismissed. We know some boys want to continue in school, but their parents might say no because they need them to work. Their parents and wider family don't always appreciate what completing their education can do for their children.</p>
<p>In my opinion, although there are some protection services available, boys and their parents are not aware of them. The services that are available are often promoted for young girls, so I think sometimes the boys are missed out. This can also lead to them feeling excluded.</p>	<p>I think it is known within the community that there are some abusive practices taking place against children, but there is some rejection of these young people needing support, particularly the boys. From those that do want to find help, they don't know what services are there to help them.</p>	<p>Young people's concerns are sometimes dismissed by members of the community and their families. It's expected that children do what is needed to support their family, for example leaving school to earn money, and therefore it is not felt that they need to access recreational or educational services.</p>	<p>There are some people in our community that do not see that there are abusive and illegal customs happening against children, or maybe they turn a blind eye to it. I know that it is occasionally happening, for example early marriage and boys leaving school to work. I know too of parents treating their children badly and beating them, but the children are too scared to report it.</p>

**Colour key:**

- Boys leaving school to work
- Rejection of boys / children needing support
- Community knowledge of abusive practices
- Concerns from boys / young people dismissed
- Boys getting married early
- Lack of awareness of services
- Services are more promoted to girls than boys
- Boys feel excluded
- Boys may want to attend school
- Not valuing education
- Physical abuse against boys

## Step 3: Searching for themes

- Next we **identify broader themes within the data** by sorting codes into themes and/or sub-themes, looking for patterns across the data.
- **Codes can be associated with one or more themes**. It is also not just about how often a code comes up, data can still be valuable if it comes up once but tells us something interesting, although it is important to mention this frequency in your report.

**A theme is a pattern that captures something significant/interesting about the data.** The goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue.”

**M Maguire**  
[Thematic Analysis - All Ireland Journal of Higher Education](#)

- Next we **identify broader themes** within the data by sorting codes into themes and/or sub-themes, looking for patterns across the data.
- This is the step where we **start to interpret the data** and bring in our judgement. We are looking for the links between the codes and if there are patterns emerging between them.
- **Going back to our study questions and analysis plan** can help to come up with themes as part of a deductive approach.
- The process above may involve **going regularly back and forth between the data to generate your themes**, changing as you go.
- Some codes might not be specific enough, or too vague, and could be discarded. **You might want to put them in a ‘miscellaneous’ grouping as you go.**

In the example below we have come up with the theme: **Parental / family barriers to young people accessing services**, against the codes and extracts below:

Themes:	1. Rejection of boys / children needing support	2. Parental / family pressures to work	3. Lack of awareness of services	4. Not valuing education
Extracts:	I feel that boys are not as likely to access services, particularly services that focus on child protection, and therefore it is not expected by their parents, families and wider community that they actually need this support.	There can also be resistance from families to these young people accessing school as they are expected by their families to earn money and support their wife.	Where there is support, I don't think that it is very well promoted as community members I speak to don't always know what their children can access.	There is a lack of awareness within families on the importance of education.
	It's expected that children do what is needed to support their family, for example leaving school to earn money, and therefore it is not felt that they need to access recreational or educational services	It's expected that children do what is needed to support their family, for example leaving school to earn money	From those that do want to find help, they don't know what services are there to help them.	Their parents and wider family don't always appreciate what completing their education can do for their children.
	I think it is known within the community that there are some abusive practices taking place against children, but there is some rejection of these young people needing support, particularly the boys.	For example, if they want to continue in school, their parents might say no because they need them to work.	In my opinion, although there are some protection services available, boys and their parents are not aware of them.	

## Step 4: Reviewing themes

- Next, we review the themes we have come up with and check if they make sense.
- This involves going back to the coded extracts and double checking if the data supports your themes.
- We also look at whether the themes can be combined or dropped?
- This is also a good stage to consider whether the analysis biases we explored earlier are affecting your analysis.

“If we encounter problems with our themes, we might split them up, combine them, discard them or create new ones: whatever makes them more useful and accurate.”

**How to do thematic analysis,**  
**Jack Caulfield,**

<https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/thematic-analysis/>

“Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes.”

**Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke**

## Step 5: What is the data telling you?

- Once we have our themes we can pull them together **to tell a story**.
- At this stage we are looking to **describe what the themes are telling us**, using examples and quotes from the data.
- We should give an indication of **how regularly the theme appeared** in the data.
- Your narrative can go beyond description and include your own analysis of what the themes **mean e.g. if taking a deductive approach, does this match your assumptions?**
- If we have collected both quantitative and qualitative data as part of a mixed method approach, we are now ready to combine the analysis together, which we explore further in the next module.
- Here you can see how we have brought together the codes and extracts under a theme into narrative:

Community members that took part in our focus groups identified a number of different barriers to boys accessing health, education, child protection and recreational services in the community. This included pressure from parents and families for boys to leave school and enter into employment to support their (wider) families.

**“There can also be resistance from families to these young people accessing school as they are expected by their families to earn money and support their wife” Community member participating in the focus group.**

There was an indication from some participants that this was connected to boys marrying earlier, with a resulting pressure to support their new families. This pressure on young people to leave school and enter into employment may also have been a result of parents not fully valuing education, which was mentioned by some members of the focus group. A lack of awareness of the services available to boys in the community was also identified as a barrier by focus group participants, with one identifying: “where there is support, I don’t think that it is very well promoted as community members I speak to don’t always know what their children can access.” Finally, participants felt that parents, families and the wider community might also not realise that young people needed support, for example, because the number of boys accessing services were low.

## How to stay on track with qualitative analysis

In the six boxes below we give some advice on how to avoid issues with qualitative data analysis:

It's important to consider whether bias is coming into the process at any point.

Reviewing the bias table from the previous webinar can help to question this.

Don't worry if you end up with a large number of codes, this doesn't necessarily mean that you will have a lot of themes, and you can always cut down on the number of codes as you go if you find them unmanageable.

A code can be short, some analysts like to use one word codes, but they do need to be clear and specific and closely fit as a description of the text they are coded against.

It can be really helpful between the coding and theme stages to re-read through the detailed notes or transcripts you are analysing. This can really help to check in on whether there is sufficient evidence for your themes.

Once you have completed coding, it can be helpful to look at them without the extracts of data against them.

Do the codes evoke the data they are based on?

The description of themes needs to be detailed enough to effectively reflect the themes.

Vague themes can really cause issues when constructing the narrative.

## Bringing together quantitative and qualitative analysis

The narrative we showed on page 14 from quantitative analysis can be brought together with quantitative analysis to support the findings section of a report, as shown in the example below:

Turning to the services available to boys in the community, overall, respondents identified that services were less available for boys, with over half of respondents either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that education and health services were available to boys, and 85% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that boys had access to child protection services (see figure 1 below). The only exception related to access to recreation services, where 63% of respondents agreed that children had access to recreational services.

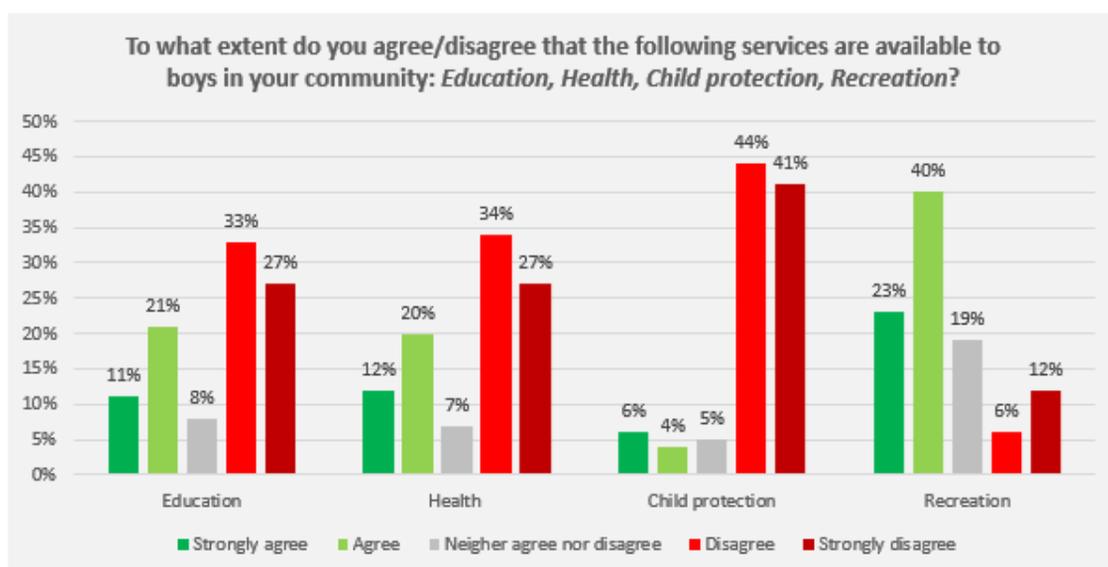


Figure 1: Community members perception of boy's access to services

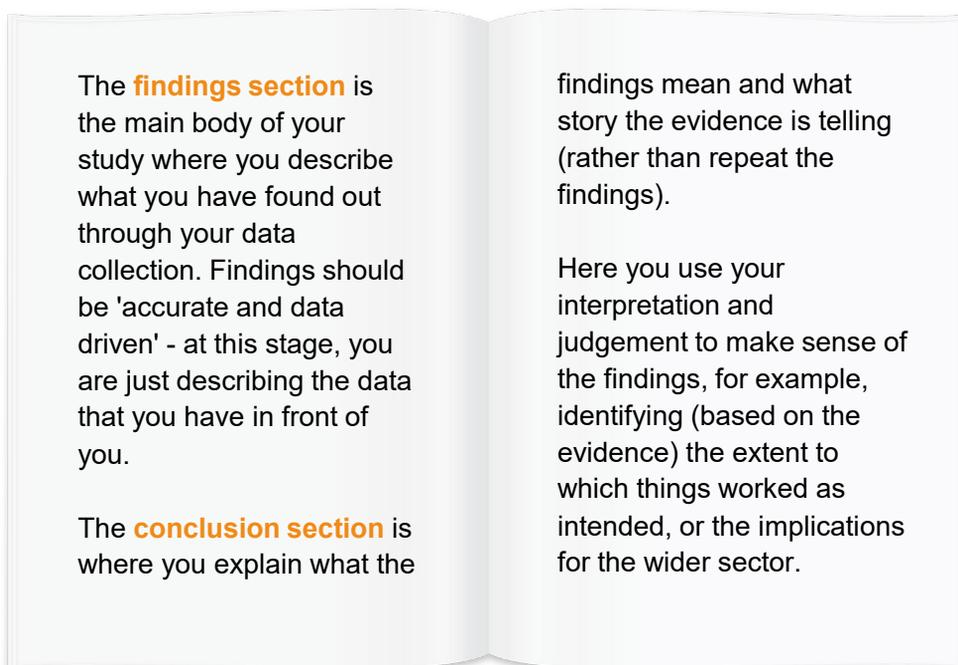
Community members that took part in our focus groups identified a number of different barriers to boys accessing health, education, child protection and recreational services in the community. This included pressure from parents and families of boys to leave school and enter into employment to support their families/wider families.

“There can also be resistance from families to these young people accessing school as they are expected by their families to earn money and support their wife” – **Community member participating in the focus group.**

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## And finally...findings and conclusions

It is likely that you will need to include the narrative in the previous page in some kind of report, which is likely to include the following sections:



The narrative from the previous page is an example of an extract from a findings section, however, to write a conclusions section we want to go a bit further with our interpretation and consider what the findings are telling us, for example:

- Thinking back to taking a deductive approach, do our findings contradict our assumptions laid out in our log-frame or theory of change?
- To what extent can we answer have the findings answered our study questions?
- What might be some of the reasons behind the findings, is there any evidence for these reasons?
- Were the findings different for different groups that were included in the analysis?

Finally, during our analysis we should always recognize and be transparent about the **limitations** of the data we have collected and the conclusions we can draw. For example, if we did not have adequate translation, then this almost certainly will have constrained the effectiveness of the facilitation, the quality of the recording, and hence the reliability of the analysis.

Recognizing the limitations of the data does not devalue it, but it helps us and others make sense of the conclusions we make.