TECHNIQUES TO IDENTIFY THEMES

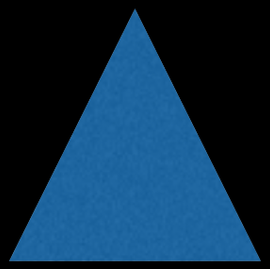
Ryan, G. & Bernard, H. R.. (2003). Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods, 15*(1), P 85-109

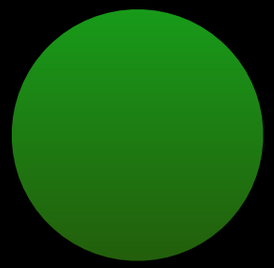
Melinda Nelson

TUL 670 B, Professor Viv Grigg

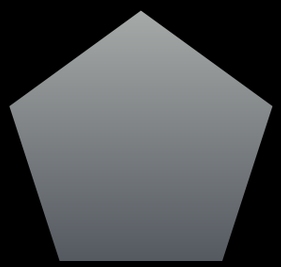
Without thematic categories, investigators have
nothing to describe,
nothing to compare,
and nothing to explain.

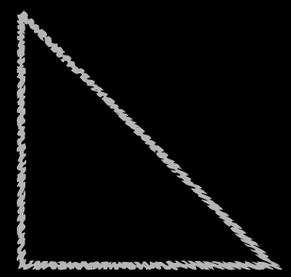
THEME IDENTIFICATION IS ONE OF THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL TASKS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH.





Themes come in all *shapes* and **sizes**





A rose by any other name is still a rose.

Conversely, a `theme' and `expression' by any other name is still a theme and expression.

Principles for Thematic Analysis in Cultures

by anthropologist Morris Opler (1945)

1. Themes are only visible and discoverable through the manifestation of expressions in data. *(Expressions without reference to themes are meaningless.)*

2. Some theme expressions are obvious and others are subtler.

3. Cultural systems comprise sets of interrelated themes.

   Theme importance is related to

   - how often it appears in the culture
   - how pervasive it is across different ideas/practices in the culture
   - how people react when the theme is violated
   - the degree to which the number, force and variety of a theme expression is controlled by specific contexts

Data and text analysis involves several tasks.

The focus in Ryan & Bernard's article is on discovering themes and subthemes in qualitative data.

Each of the techniques they introduce to accomplish this have advantages & disadvantages.
Make explicit the technique(s) you use for theme discovery.

Not surprisingly, varying techniques
are suited for varying types of qualitative research.

Scrutiny Techniques -Observational

Repetitions

Indigenous Categories

Metaphors and Analogies

Theory-Related Material

Similarities and Differences

Linguistic Connectors

Missing Data

Transitions

Processing Techniques -Manipulative

Cutting and Sorting

(Many variations and the most versatile. Ex: Cutting out each quote and then sorting them into piles indicating themes. There are ‘Lumpers’ who minimize differences and ‘Splitters’ who maximize difference.)

Word lists and Key Words in Context

(Good for early stages of research. Data distillation)

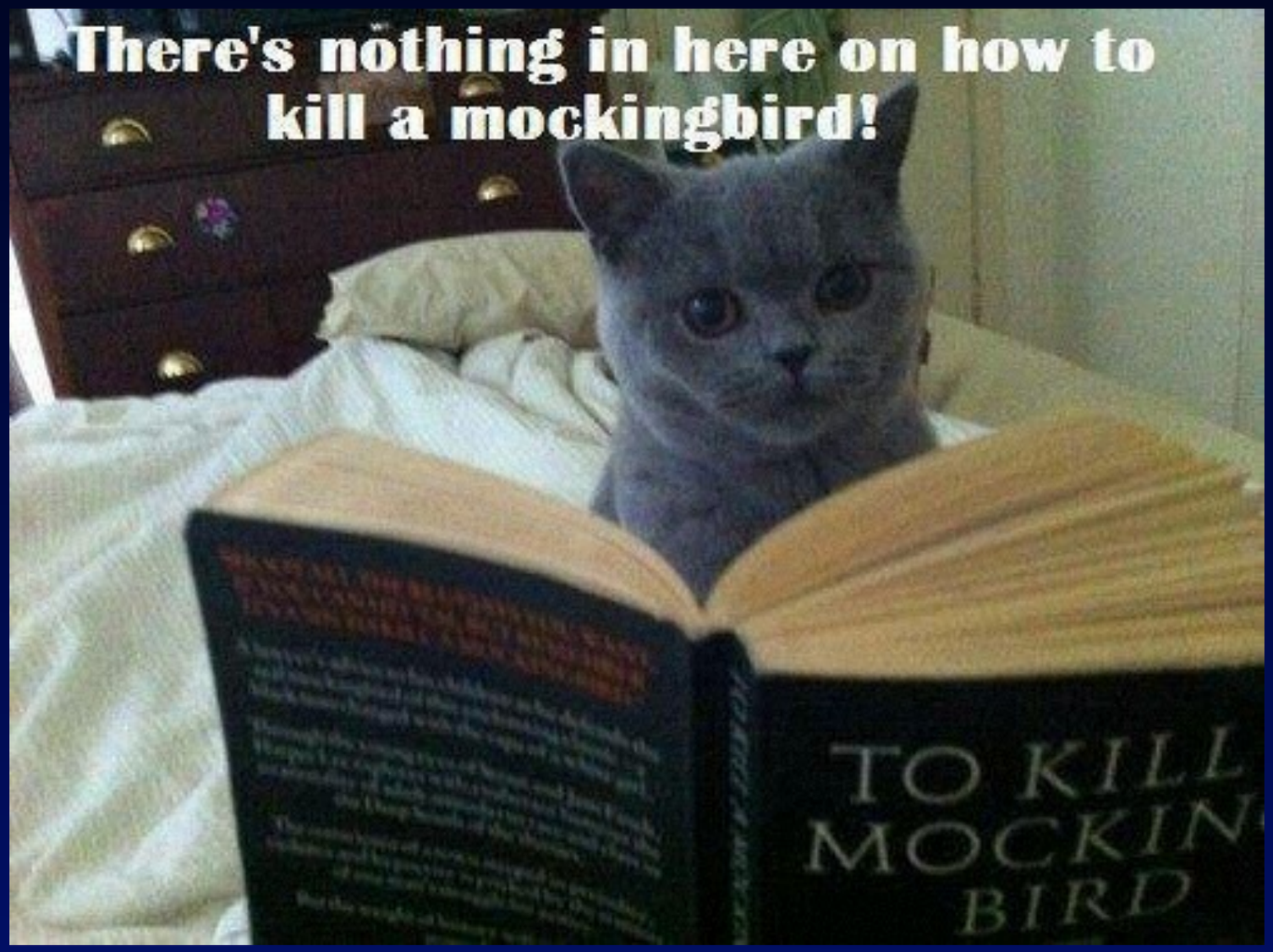
Word Co-Occurrence

(Coder bias reduced)

Metacoding

(Examines relationship among a priori themes to find potentially new themes)

Sorting Through The Confusion Of Selecting Amongst Multiple Techniques



Evaluation
(Selecting Your Techniques)

Five Dimensions to Consider

Kind of Data (Textual, pictures, sounds….)

Expertise (Linguistic connectors, missing data….)

Labor (Computer software help….)

Number and Kinds of Themes

(More is better usually so apply several techniques.)

Reliability and Validity (*"There are as many ways of 'seeing' the data as once can invent." (Dey, 1993, p 110-11)*

-Our raw field notes provide the means for our themes to become visible (and thus discoverable).

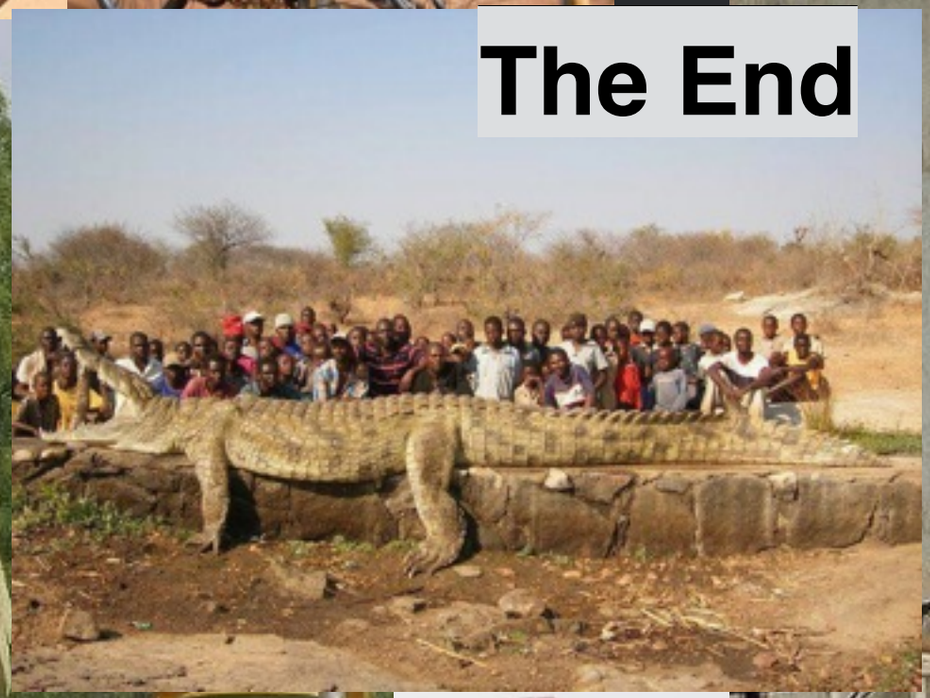
-Background knowledge (from academic reading and popular media), influence how we “see” the data.

-Thus, data is often blindly biased bythe themes the researcher discovers”as someone with a dissimilar background might illuminate disparate themes.

Key takeaway

Inherently, theme discovery represents judgments we make of the data.

If all of them were recorded, I imagine the world itself wouldn't have enough room for the scrolls that would be written. John 21:25



The End