

# Appendix H - Spradley's theme synthesis and report writing

## Editor's Note

This appendix contains a summary of ideas about theme synthesis and about writing qualitative reports. Most of these ideas come from James Spradley's book *Participant Observation*.

The data analysis activities presented in other chapters (Domain analysis, Taxonomic analysis, and Componential analysis) allow the qualitative inquirer to focus attention on in-depth analyses of selected domains within the broad cultural scene or social situation under study. However, in addition to examining selected details of a culture, qualitative inquiry should "chart the broader features of the cultural landscape." This chapter discusses "Theme analysis," a set of procedures which one can use to understand and convey a holistic sense of the entire cultural scene.

### 1. Pages 140-141

Many qualitative researchers attempt to convey holistic views of the scenes they study with an **inventory approach** which simply lists or identifies all the domains they have discovered. However, Spradley suggests that an important extension of the inventory approach consists of the **discovery of cultural themes** that a [culture's] members have learned and use to connect those domains."

Theme analysis is based on the assumption that "every culture, and every cultural scene, is more than a jumble of parts. It consists of a system of meaning that is integrated into some kind of larger pattern." Spradley defines "a cultural theme as any principle recurrent in a number of domains, tacit or explicit, and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning."

### 2. Pages 141-142

To clarify further what a theme is, Spradley says that themes are usually stated as assertions (e.g., in Apache culture, men are superior to women). These assertions or "cognitive principles" represent what people in the culture being studied "believe and accept as true and valid; [they are assumptions] about the nature of [people's] commonly held experience." These assertions vary greatly with respect to their generality. But when an assertion applies to numerous situations and recurs in two or more domains within a

given culture, it is considered a cultural theme. These themes do not need to “apply to every part of a culture. Some themes recur within a restricted context or only link two or three domains.” Single all-encompassing themes are rare. “It is more likely that a culture or a particular cultural scene will be integrated around a set of major themes and minor themes.”

Spradley presents examples of themes from studies he conducted of tramps and of cocktail waitresses in the USA. One example from the study of tramps illustrates that many of the domains studied involved the concept of **risk**. Spradley used that concept to organize and interpret many of the tramps’ activities- it became a theme. In the cocktail waitress study, he found the theme of **gender** running through almost every domain he discovered.

### 3. Pages 142-144

Another important distinction is between tacit and **explicit themes**. Explicit themes are those that “appear as folk sayings, mottoes, proverbs, or recurrent expressions” (such as “Pigs are our hearts” from the Mae Enga in New Guinea or “Harmony through diversity” in Indonesia). These statements rarely contain all the information needed to understand the theme’s application in the culture, but they may be a clue to the perceptive researcher for further inquiry.

“Most cultural themes remain at the **tacit** level of knowledge. People do not express them easily, even though they know the cultural principle and use it to organize their behavior and interpret experience. Themes come to be taken for granted, slipping into that area of knowledge where people are not quite aware or seldom find need to express what they know. This means that the [researcher] will have to make inferences about the principles that exist.” For example, although judges would explicitly deny them and tramps never stated them explicitly, Spradley discovered three rules that seemed to be followed tacitly by judges in courtrooms where tramps were brought for trial:

Rule 1: When guilty of public drunkenness, a man deserves greater punishment if he is poor.

Rule 2: When guilty of public drunkenness, a man deserves greater punishment if he has a bad reputation.

Rule 3: When guilty of public drunkenness, a man deserves greater punishment if he does not have a steady job.

### 4. Page 144

“Themes not only recur again and again throughout different parts of a culture, but they also connect different subsystems of a culture. They serve as a general semantic relationship between domains.” Spradley suggests “that analysis consist[s] of a search for (a) the parts of a culture, (b) the relationship among those parts, and (c) the relationship of the parts to the whole. In studying cultural domains and taxonomies, [we] have been searching for parts and their relationships. The search for themes involves identifying

another part of every culture, those cognitive principles that appear again and again. But the search for themes is also a means for discovering the relationships among domains and the relationships of all the various parts to the whole cultural scene.”

## 5. Pages 144-154

Spradley spends the rest of this chapter discussing various strategies he and others have used to discover themes. These are not as well developed into systematic approaches as some of the steps discussed in other handouts have been. But they provide some ideas participants can begin with in discovering themes in their own studies.

1. Total **immersion** in the cultural scene during the field research has always been used to discover themes. By concentrating all one’s attention and experience in the research setting, the researcher’s thoughts and feelings become saturated by the experiences of the people under study. Then relationships among domains and new themes begin to emerge almost subconsciously as the researcher reflects on the field notes accumulated during immersion.
2. **Making a componential analysis of cover terms for entire domains** is another strategy for identifying themes. The componential analysis activities discussed in another handout focus the researcher’s attention on included terms within a selected domain for a focused and in depth analysis. But the same techniques can be used to discover attributes of domains and the dimensions of contrast between those domains within a cultural scene. This holistic approach reveals patterns within and between domains, which are the same as themes. Spradley gives an example from a study of a small factory which makes tannery equipment. He identified 41 domains within this cultural scene and then, using a paradigm chart, began searching for similarities and contrasts among these domains. This focused his attention on the whole scene and the relationships among the domains within it.
3. An even broader perspective may be gained by **searching for a larger domain that includes the cultural scene**. With this approach, the researcher locates the cultural scene under study (the factory in the example given above, or a supermarket) within a larger domain of which the cultural scene is an instance. For example, the tannery equipment factory discussed above is a kind of factory; the supermarket is a kind of store. Seeing the cultural scene within this context may bring themes to mind.
4. “Another strategy for discovering cultural themes is the **examination of [and search for similarities among] the dimensions of contrast** for all the domains that have been analyzed in detail.” Again, this strategy utilizes analyses made during componential analyses for selected domains within a cultural scene. Spradley presents an example from his study of tramps to show how dimensions of contrast for the domains “tramps”, “trusties”, and “drinking behavior” all contained references to a concept he eventually called “mobility.” This concept became one of the central themes of his study.
5. **Identify organizing domains**. As discussed in other chapters, some domains within a cultural scene tend to organize a lot of the information included in other domains.

This is often the case with domains using the semantic relationship “X is a stage of Y.” For example, Spradley’s study of tramps included a domain called “stages in making the bucket” which gave a grand tour of how tramps got put in jail. As he described each stage in his final report, he was able to connect other domains to those stages for elaboration. The chronology of “making the bucket” gave a common strand or theme around which the rest of the story could be told.

6. **Make a schematic diagram of the scene** to help you visualize relationships among domains in that scene and relationships between that scene and other domains in other scenes. This approach is really just a visual way to do the thinking described in the other strategies described above. For example, Spradley presents (on page 150) a diagram that represents the “stages in making the bucket.” Seeing a diagram like this can suggest possible relationships and themes to the researcher.
7. **Search for universal themes.** “In the same way that there appear to be universal semantic relationships, there appear to be some universal cultural themes, the larger relationships among domains.” Many of these are represented by theories in social science. Others are simply patterns one finds in reading the literature. The more familiar a qualitative researcher is with the literature which includes this growing set of universal patterns, the more useful they will be as a basis for comparison with qualitative data. Spradley presents a short list of six universal themes to illustrate this point. But there are many more to be discovered in the literature. By reflecting on these themes while reviewing your own field notes, you may discover instances of universal themes in your own data which will help you organize that information. Spradley’s six themes are:

1. **Social conflict**

People have social conflicts with each other and these conflicts can often be useful ways to organize and understand the details observed in a cultural scene. For example, the conflicts between tramps and others in society related to the major theme of risk avoidance Spradley discovered.

2. **Cultural contradictions**

“Cultural knowledge is never entirely consistent in every detail. Most cultures contain contradictory assertions, beliefs, and ideas. Every [qualitative researcher] is well advised to search for inherent contradictions that people have learned to live with and then ask, ‘How can they live with them?’ This may lead to the discovering of important themes.” For example, in many cultural scenes, people have official images they try to project which contradict their “real” or insider image. What other contradictions do the people you are studying demonstrate?

3. **Informal techniques of social control**

By paying attention to how participants in your study attempt to control behavior or get people to conform to the values and norms of their society, important cultural themes can be discovered.

4. **Managing impersonal social relationships**

Especially in urban cultures, people develop ways to deal with people they do not know. Searching for actors use of such strategies in your study can reveal

themes.

5. **Acquiring and maintaining status**

In most cultures, people strive to achieve status, although the symbols of status vary greatly from culture to culture. Discovering what participants in your study do to acquire and maintain status should reveal important themes.

6. **Solving problems**

“Culture is a tool for solving problems. [Qualitative inquirers] usually seek to discover what problems a person’s cultural knowledge is designed to solve.”

Many other domains of a cultural scene can be related to the types of problems people are trying to solve and how they are doing it.

8. **Write a summary overview of the cultural scene.** “This strategy for discovering cultural themes will help to pull together the major outlines of the scene you are studying. In several brief pages, write an overview of the cultural scene for someone who has never heard about what you are studying. Include as many of the major domains as you can as well as any cultural themes you have identified. The goal of this overview is to condense everything you know down to the bare essentials. In the process of writing this kind of summary, you will be forced to turn from the hundreds of specific details [in your field notes] and deal primarily with the larger parts of the culture; this, in turn, will focus your attention on the relationships among the parts of the culture and lead to discovering cultural themes.”

## Ideas about writing

The ongoing accumulation of field notes constitutes an initial type of report. In fact, for some applications of qualitative inquiry, no other formal report may be needed at all (e.g., when a teacher is gathering information for use only in his or her classroom and is not going to share that information with anyone). However, in most instances, qualitative inquirers must select from the great wealth of information they have compiled to create reports that will be useful to various audiences. This chapter and readings provide suggestions for writing reports.

### 1. Pages 155-6

Throughout the process of conducting a study, qualitative inquirers accumulate many pages of field notes which include descriptions based on participant observations, interview transcripts, document and photo analyses, domain, taxonomic and componential analyses, reflections on method, reflections on field relations, and so on. This usually amounts to hundreds of pages.

You will need to review these notes throughout the study in order to conduct the cycle of collection-analysis-collection-analysis-collection-etc. described in other handouts. However, “By taking several hours to review all your notes- condensed accounts, expanded accounts, journal, analysis and interpretation- and recording what you have collected” into a new list or inventory, you will accomplish three important objectives:

1. "It will help you see the cultural scene as a whole,"
2. "It will identify gaps in your research that can be easily filled," and
3. "You will discover ways to organize your final paper" or report of your research.

## 2. Pages 156-159

Such an inventory can be made on pages at the front of your field notes, on cards, on a single huge piece of cardboard, in a computer database, or any other way you want to use. Several things to include in your inventory are discussed by Spradley:

4. **Make a single comprehensive list of cultural domains** that you have identified during the study by writing only the cover term in the inventory. This involves reading through the field notes again to pull out previously discovered domains and to identify new ones. It may help to review again the "general cultural domains" discussed in the focused observations handout too. Even more domains may come to mind as you complete the other inventory activities discussed below.
5. **Make a list of analyzed domains**, which you have used during the focused portions of the study. These will probably fit into three categories with the first two representing the focus you have used during the study:
  1. **Complete**: those domains for which you have worked out a taxonomy and a paradigm,
  2. **Partial**: those domains for which you have done a partial taxonomic and componential analysis, and
  3. **Incomplete**: those domains for which you have cover terms and some included terms, but which lack any systematic analysis.
6. **Make a list of collected sketch maps** or diagrams that you have created in your field notes or that you could create to represent physical features, routes people use, relationships among people, patterns of activities, and so on.
7. **Make a list of themes** (major and minor) that you have discovered throughout the study. Categorize them as complete, in process, or tentative, depending on how well you have developed them through theme analysis.
8. **Make an inventory of examples** you can use to illustrate the domains and their categories, and the themes you will address in a report. These provide the flesh you will want to put on the skeleton created by the many analysis activities conducted earlier. Examples are stories, anecdotes, events, quotations, etc. that illustrate points you want to make about the situation you have studied.
9. **Identify any organizing domains** you have discovered (e.g., stages in shopping is an organizing domain for a study on grocery shopping). Such domains can provide an organizing framework for writing a report.
10. **Make an index or table of contents of your field notes**. You could identify the pages in the field notes associated with each of the selected themes and domains you want to write about. Comprehensive indices can be generated with some word processing computer programs which index every word in the field

notes.

11. **Make an inventory list of miscellaneous data** or artifacts such as newspaper articles, memos, photos, etc. that you have collected during the study.
12. **Make a list of additional research possibilities** for the scene you have been studying or elsewhere that you believe would be relevant to the research you are completing. This will “clarify the boundaries of the work you have done and make you aware of the limitations of your own work.” This list will help you plan subsequent studies and will help others build on your work.

### 3. Pages 160-161

Although any report of a qualitative study is incomplete, partial, and likely to need revision, you should begin writing such reports sooner than you might think. The process of writing will help you discover information gathered during the research process.

The best way to learn to write qualitative reports is to write one. To help, you should read examples of reports and review the points made by Spradley. But you will learn best by doing it!

### 4. Pages 161

Conducting qualitative inquiry may be thought of as a form of translation which “discovers the meanings in one culture and communicates them in such a way that people with another cultural tradition can understand them.” This translation process involves two major tasks:

13. Digest and make sense out of the meaning processes or systems used by the people you are studying (all the collection and analysis activities discussed in earlier handouts were intended to help you learn to do this), and
14. “Communicate the cultural meanings you have discovered to readers who are unfamiliar with that culture or cultural scene.” This means that you have to be able to communicate in writing with an understanding of both the cultural meaning systems of your informants and the cultural meaning systems of your audience. “A truly effective translation requires an intimate knowledge of two cultures: the one described and the one tacitly held by the audience who will read the description.”

### 5. Pages 162-168

“One fundamental cause of inadequate cultural translations lies in the failure to understand and use different levels of writing.” Spradley points out that many social science writers use very general levels of writing which fail to reveal the meanings in peoples’ actions because very little concrete detail is included. The qualitative research process begins with description and discovery of particular, concrete, and specific events of everyday life. Then, through the use of several analytical approaches, the researcher discovers domains and patterns which represent the cultural scenes being studied. These discoveries allow

comparison of the scene with other scenes, cultures and theories.

But general statements associated with these broader views of the scenes studied should not stand alone in written reports. They do not adequately translate the cultural meanings of the people studied to the audiences. For a well written qualitative inquiry report, “the concern with the general is incidental to an understanding of the particular. In order for a reader to see the lives of the people we study, we must show them through particulars, not merely talk about them in generalities.”

To overcome the problem of using only general statements, Spradley identifies six levels of writing and suggests that all six are needed in qualitative reports. The proportion of a report dedicated to each level should vary depending on the goals of the inquirer and the audience of the report. The six levels are described briefly from most general to most particular:

15. **Level One: Universal Statements** are broad statements that summarize patterns found in the cultural scene being studied and in all other scenes that have been or might be studied in the world (e.g., in Spradley’s cocktail waitress study, he used his study experience in a single bar in a specific city to assert that “Every society takes the biological differences between female and male to create a special kind of reality: feminine and masculine identities.”). The beginning researcher might be timid about making such broad statements; but there are some universal patterns and when you discover one, you should state it.
16. **Level Two: Cross-Cultural Descriptive Statements** are “statements about two or more societies, assertions that are true for some societies but not necessarily for all societies.” These statements help show that the cultural scene is not completely unique and isolated from the rest of the world, although it has many contrasting characteristics as well (e.g., in the waitress study, Spradley noted that there are complex societies and simpler societies and the cocktail waitress phenomenon is part of a complex society, involving many more cultural perspectives than most phenomena in simpler societies).
17. **Level Three: General Statements about a Society or Cultural Group** are broad statements about the culture of which the cultural scene being studied is an example. The culture can be simple or complex, such as a tribe in Africa, American culture, groups of people who do the same types of work, etc. For example, in Spradley’s study of waitress in Brady’s Bar, he made statements like this which apply “to all institutions of which Brady’s was one example: ‘Bars, in general, are places of employment for hundreds of thousands of women, almost always as cocktail waitresses. Their role in bars tends to be an extension of their role at home– serving the needs of men.... Like most institutions of American society, men hold sway at the center of social importance’.”
18. **Level Four: General Statements about a specific Cultural Scene** are general but descriptive statements about the scene you are studying. Often they are abstract statements made by informants and will appear in your fieldnotes



as quotations. These statements often contain many of the themes you will want to communicate to the audience; but they are too abstract to stand alone (e.g., in the waitress study, Spradley made statements like, “The waitresses at Brady’s get hassled by customers.” or “At one level, Brady’s Bar is primarily a place of business. At another level, Brady’s Bar is a place where men can come to play out exaggerated masculine roles, acting out their fantasies of sexual prowess, and reaffirming their own male identities. Brady’s Bar is a men’s ceremonial center”).

19. **Level Five: Specific Statements about a Cultural Domain** are statements referring to the cultural scene you are studying, using the cover and included terms of the domains you discovered and want to describe for the reader. These statements may refer to taxonomies and paradigms, which represent an outline of relationships within and between domains. Use of limited descriptive narrative may put some flesh on these bones or outlines but most of the language is still at a fairly abstract level (e.g., Spradley gives an example from the waitress study “of a specific statement about the domain, ‘asking for a drink.’ [cover term] which makes up part of the culture of cocktail waitresses. ‘One frequent way that men ask for a drink is not to ask for a drink at all. In the situation where it is appropriate to ask for a drink, they ask instead for the waitress. This may be done in the form of teasing, hustling, hassling [included terms], or some other speech act’).
20. **Level Six: Specific Incident Statements** are the most different from all the other levels. Such a statement “takes the reader immediately to the actual level of behavior and objects, to the level of perceiving these things.” Such statements help the reader to envision and even feel what the actors are experiencing. “Instead of merely being told what people know, how they generate behavior from this knowledge, and how they interpret things, you have been shown this cultural knowledge in action. A good [qualitative] translation shows; a poor one only tells.”

Spradley gives an example from the waitress study that is closely related to the examples given for the other five levels and which could be used as a piece of data for generating the other statements: “Sandy is working the upper section on Friday night. She walks up to the corner table where there is a group of five she has never seen before: four guys and a girl who are loud and boisterous. She steps up to the table and asks, ‘Are you ready to order now?’ One of the males grabs her by the waist and jerks her towards him. ‘I already know what I want! I’ll take you,’ he says as he smiles innocently up at her.”

To further illustrate the six levels of writing and their effects on readers, Spradley provides examples of six statements from his research on tramps. All these statements describe one aspect of tramps’ experience- “begging, borrowing, panhandling, lending, and otherwise exchanging things.”

21. **LEVEL ONE:** Reciprocity among human beings is balanced where two people

give to each other over time, each giving and each receiving. Such reciprocity occurs in all societies.

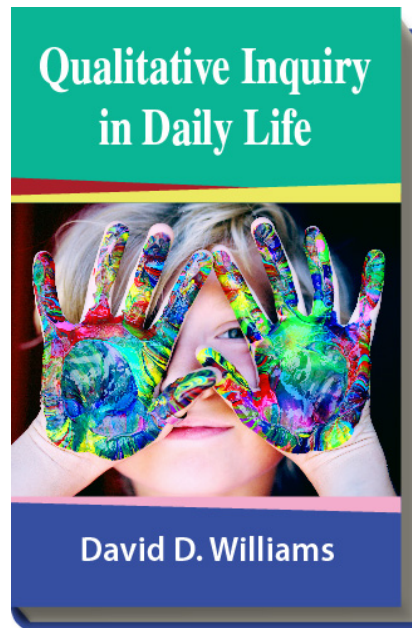
22. **LEVEL TWO:** Tramps, like those who live in tribal villages, depend on one another in time of need. They expect others to reciprocate. A Kwakiutl Indian will give in a potlatch and later receive gifts at someone else's potlatch. A tramp will give to another tramp and also beg from another tramp.
23. **LEVEL THREE:** Tramps engage in much more reciprocal exchange than do other members of the larger society. This kind of exchange takes many forms.
24. **LEVEL FOUR:** A tramp in the Seattle City Jail will exchange goods and services with other tramps. If he is a trusty in the jail, he might exchange a service for money with someone in lockup.
25. **LEVEL FIVE:** (Informant's statement) "Yes, a tramp will beg from other tramps. If you're panhandling you can expect another tramp to give you money or a cigarette if he has it. You realize that sometime he will need something and then it will be your turn."
26. **LEVEL SIX:** It was a dull Tuesday afternoon and a slight mist of rain was blowing gently in from the Puget Sound. Joe had become a kickout an hour earlier; several minutes ago he walked off the elevator on the first floor of the Public Safety Building and found his way to the street. Pulling the collar of his worn tweed jacket up around his neck, he hunched his shoulders slightly and headed downtown, wondering where he would find money for a drink or even a cigarette. He might have to make a flop under the bridge on Washington Street tonight to stay out of the rain. He saw a man approaching him as he headed slowly down James Street, obviously another tramp. Looked like a home guard tramp, but he couldn't tell for sure. "Can you spare a quarter for a jug?" he asked. "I just got a kickout." "No, I'm flat on my ass myself," the other man said, "but how about a smoke, all I got are Bull Durhams." After taking a light too, Joe started on down James Street looking for a tourist or businessman to panhandle. Spradley urges beginning qualitative researchers to concentrate on using the most general and the most specific levels of writing "because generalities are best communicated through particulars." Of course, the amount of space you have for a report, the context in which your report will be read, and your goals for doing the research should all be taken into account along with the audience you are writing for to determine the balance between each level. General audiences will appreciate more writing at level six with a few abstract statements woven in. Professional and academic journals have restricted space; statements at levels one and two, illustrated with statements from levels five and six provide one effective way to use that space.

## 6. Pages 168-172

Spradley points out that translating all the information gathered through qualitative inquiry into a report can seem like an overwhelming task. Therefore, he breaks it into a few manageable chunks or suggested steps:

27. **Step 1: Select an audience**, identify it clearly, and then keep in mind throughout the writing, who that audience is. By doing this, the researcher will respond to the interests and needs of that audience in much the same way he or she would if talking to that audience. An excellent way to do this is to pick a target reader, learn all you can about the interests of that person and then write the report for that person. If you do that, every reader who has similar interests will feel the report was written for him or her.
28. **Step 2: Select a thesis**, central message or point you want to make with the report. Theses may come from the themes discovered during the research, from the goals for doing the research in the first place, or from the literature related to the study. The thesis should be stated as briefly as possible and then used throughout writing to organize and integrate the report.
29. **Step 3: Make a list of topics and create an outline**. You cannot include all the information gathered in any single report; so “this step involves reviewing your field notes and the cultural inventory you made and listing topics you think should be included in the final description. Once listed, you can then make an outline based around your thesis. This will divide up your actual writing into sections, each of which can be done as a separate unit. If you have been writing short descriptive pieces throughout the project, many or all of these may fit into the outline.”
30. **Step 4: Write a rough draft of each section** in the outline. Don’t worry about revising or perfecting the writing at this stage. If you do, it will take too long and may seem overwhelming to you. “Write as you talk” to create this first draft of the report. Talking involves very little revising; so you get the ideas out quickly.
31. **Step 5: Revise the outline and create subheads** to reflect any changes that you discovered were needed during the drafting of the sections in step four. Sections may need rearranging. New subheads and sub-subheads may be identified to guide the reader through the structure of the report and to make the transitions between sections.
32. **Step 6: Edit the rough draft**, implementing the revised outline and subhead into the drafted sections from step four. Revise each section to improve grammar and style, while keeping the overall description and thesis in mind. Have someone review the manuscript to give you feedback.
33. **Step 7: Write the introduction and conclusion**. Although you may want to draft these earlier, they really are not needed until this stage of report writing. Once you see the rough draft as a whole, it is much easier to write these summary statements.
34. **Step 8: Reread your manuscript for examples**. Make sure you have included enough examples in the right places so that your report has the right balance of the six levels of writing for the audience and purposes you have selected.
35. **Step 9: Write the final draft**. This may mean simply a final editing and typing of the report. Rarely will you have to start writing all over, because by following the previous eight steps, you have produced several versions of the report and

will now have a draft that reflects most of the concerns that could be raised about it.



Williams, D. D. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life*. EdTech Books.  
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