‘Shine bright like a diamond’? A reply to Braun and Clarke

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We thank the authors for their commentary and humbly accept their chiding about our language on the ontological nature of themes. While noting that many qualitative researchers are content with talk of ‘themes emerging’ (e.g. Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Rennie, 1996), we recognise Braun and Clarke’s concerns around such language (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and concur with their views on the role of the researcher in the analysis. Nonetheless, there is something in the data that underscores the researcher’s interpretation. The process is more complex than finding a diamond in the sand, it is not just about a theme emerging passively, yet that does not break the idea behind the approach we presented. Whatever you want to call the something that is in the data, and we could use ‘codes’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or maybe ‘accounts’ (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015), that something can be conceptualised along the same lines.

That something may or may not be present in a particular interview, some somethings will be more prevalent than others. If we want to capture more somethings and less common somethings, there are various approaches you can take. Morse (2000) and Malterud et al. (2015) discuss these, including varying your sampling strategy or how you perform the interviews, but they, and others (Tracy, 2010), agree that more participants is sometimes appropriate.

To quote Malterud et al. (2015, p. 6), ‘The best qualitative analysis is conducted from empirical data containing abundant and various accounts of new aspects of the phenomenon we intend to explore […] The sample should be neither too small nor too large. We concur. We should have said more about the ‘too large’ and agree with Braun and Clarke’s observation that larger numbers can lead to less rigour in other ways, as has also been said of randomised controlled trials. But more is sometimes better. We also contend that our model does not point to ‘relatively large sample sizes’: our approach is consistent with the numbers in Braun and Clarke (2013).

Where our approach differs from others is the addition of probability theory. Malterud et al. (2015, p. 3) write ‘we might be fortunate and drop into a group of participants with a diversity of experiences. Hence, sample specificity cannot always be predicted but can be supported by suitable recruitment’. Sampling indeed involves an element of chance. You do not know what someone is going to say before you talk to them. Research participants will have different experiences or perspectives: what you get in your sample ‘cannot always be predicted’. We all might be fortunate or unfortunate in our sampling. We can use maths to put likely bounds on those chances. We don’t believe an observation about numbers contradicts non-positivist approaches.

Our intuitions can be wrong with probabilities. By giving a probabilistic formula, we aim to assist researchers’ thinking on sample sizes. Probability theory is a way of helping to achieve that goal of