



Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I *not* use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches

Virginia Braun¹ | Victoria Clarke²

¹School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

²Department of Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

Correspondence

Virginia Braun, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, Aotearoa New Zealand.
Email: v.braun@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract

Thematic analysis methods, including the reflexive approach we have developed, are widely used in counselling and psychotherapy research, as are other approaches that seek to develop 'patterns' (themes, categories) across cases. Without a thorough grounding in the conceptual foundations of a wide variety of across-case analytic approaches, and qualitative research more broadly—something rarely offered in counselling training—it can be difficult to understand how these differ, where they overlap, and which might be appropriate for a particular research project. Our aim in this paper is to support researchers in counselling and psychotherapy to select an appropriate across-case approach for their research, and to justify their choice, by discussing conceptual and procedural differences and similarities between reflexive thematic analysis (TA) and four other across-case approaches. Three of these are also widely used in counselling and psychotherapy research—qualitative content analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis and grounded theory. The fourth—discourse analysis—is less widely used but importantly exemplifies the critical qualitative research tradition. We contextualise our comparative approach by highlighting the diversity *within* TA. TA is best thought of as a spectrum of methods—from types that prioritise coding accuracy and reliability to reflexive approaches like ours that emphasise the inescapable subjectivity of data interpretation. Although reflexive TA provides the point of comparison for our discussion of other across-case approaches, our aim is not to promote reflexive TA as 'best'. Rather, we encourage the knowing selection and use of analytic methods and methodologies in counselling and psychotherapy research.

KEYWORDS

Discourse analysis, grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis, qualitative content analysis, thematic discourse analysis, thematic decomposition

1 | INTRODUCTION

It is tempting to imagine that there is a perfect qualitative analytic approach waiting, and if you can only identify it, you will do excellent

qualitative research. We refer to such thinking as a 'hallowed method' quest. Within such thinking, there is *one* analytic approach ideally suited to a particular research project, and the mission of the researcher in counselling and psychotherapy, and other fields, is to identify and

use that approach or, if using another approach, justify why they did not use the ideal method. We see such thinking as evident in queries we get about whether it is 'okay' to use thematic analysis (TA), when counselling and psychotherapy students have been told they *should* instead use another approach, usually a ready-made or 'off-the-shelf' methodology (Chamberlain, 2012), which provides a pre-prepared package of theory, analytic method and (elements of) research design. Examples of such off-the-shelf methodologies include grounded theory (GT; see Birks & Mills, 2015), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; see Smith et al., 2009) and discourse analysis (DA; see Willig, 2013). Such methodologies (theoretically informed frameworks for research) are often perceived as superior to methods (theoretically independent tools and techniques; framing theory is determined separately) such as TA. This seems to be based on the mistaken belief that TA is atheoretical and thus lacks analytic power and sophistication (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Not only are methodologies *not* inherently better than methods (see Chamberlain, 2012), but there is also often considerable overlap in what different analytic methods and methodologies can deliver. We have previously argued that there is potential for great similarity in 'output' from pattern-based/across-case (Yeh & Inman, 2007) methodologies like GT, IPA and even poststructuralist DA¹, and (reflexive) TA, depending on how each analysis is conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This means in considering and deciding on an analytic approach it is more like deciding between which type of fruit you will choose to eat (apple, orange or banana?), than deciding whether to have fruit, a slice of cake, or a burger.

We take the view that there is *rarely* one ideal method—or methodology—for a research project. There is no *requirement* to use an off-the-shelf methodology just because it is the most well-known approach associated with a particular type of qualitative research. Researchers select analytic approaches for all sorts of reasons, sometimes conceptual, sometimes pragmatic and sometimes because an approach is familiar and comfortable—to themselves or to their research supervisor, mentor or collaborator. Unless the analysis can only be tackled in *one* way—which is not the case for those interested in exploring patterned/across-case meaning—there is nearly always a range of options. Researchers do not need to go on a 'hal-lowed method' quest. What is important, is that the method used 'fits' the project's purpose, that theoretical assumptions, research question and methods are in alignment, and that the overall research design is coherent (Willig, 2013). This reflects a general principle for qualitative research design of design coherence or 'fit' (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Levitt et al. (2017) proposed a similar concept of 'methodological integrity' to capture when:

research designs and procedures (e.g. autoethnography, discursive analysis) support the *research goals* (i.e. the research problems/questions); respect the researcher's *approaches to inquiry* (i.e. research traditions sometimes described as world views, paradigms or philosophical/epistemological assumptions); and are tailored for *fundamental characteristics of the subject matter and the investigators* (pp. 9–10).

1.1 | When and why to use reflexive thematic analysis or another pattern-based method/ology?

Understanding where reflexive TA sits in the landscape of qualitative analytic techniques is useful for making knowing and reflexive choices about analytic approaches, and appreciating what those choices curtail and enable. In this paper, we compare reflexive TA with other patterned-based approaches, to highlight similarities and differences. This paper will provide a useful resource for counselling and psychotherapy researchers for justifying or explaining *why* reflexive TA was chosen over another method/ology, or, indeed, another method/ology over reflexive TA. In our final weighing up of what each approach offers, we consider when counselling and psychotherapy researchers might want to use these *instead of using reflexive TA*. Not because we think reflexive TA should always be the starting point, but because it gives an anchor point for the contrast.

Our focus of comparison is on other qualitative analytic approaches centred on the analysis of patterns of meaning across the data items or cases that constitute a qualitative data set. Methods that examine the fine-grained or interactional work of speech—such as conversation analysis (e.g. Madill et al., 2001) and discursive psychology (e.g. Wiggins, 2016)—have a quite different focus. As do methods that focus on biography, stories or the storied nature of life such as narrative analysis (e.g. Reissman, 2008). The approaches we consider here are qualitative content analysis (QCA), IPA, GT and (pattern-based) DA. Three of these—QCA, IPA and GT, like (reflexive) TA—are widely used in counselling and psychotherapy research. DA is less widely used but importantly exemplifies the critical qualitative research tradition.

Approaches like reflexive TA and QCA are primarily methods, offering tools and techniques that are either atheoretical or theoretically flexible. They become infused with theoretical assumptions when enacted in a particular study. Theory needs to be made explicit, for quality practice, even if this is not mandated by methodological authors, as is typically the case with QCA. Approaches like IPA, GT and DA are best thought of as methodologies, as theoretically informed and delimited frameworks for research. They are not just techniques, so detaching them from their methodological anchors rarely makes sense, and doing so often results in poor analytic practice and outputs. We highlight what these different approaches offer, in contrast to reflexive TA, and what researchers need to commit to, and be constrained by, in making a particular methodological choice. But first we contextualise these comparisons by discussing the characteristics of our approach to reflexive TA and the family of TA methods to which it belongs.

1.2 | Reflexive thematic analysis and the thematic analysis family of methods

TA is frequently misunderstood in counselling and psychotherapy research, and elsewhere, as a singular method with one set of procedures (Clarke & Braun, 2018). However, it is best thought of as a

family of methods (Fugard & Potts, 2020), with some characteristics in common but also significant divergences in underlying research values, the conceptualisation of core constructs and analytic procedures. TA approaches typically acknowledge the potential for inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) orientations to coding, capturing semantic (explicit or overt) and latent (implicit, underlying; not necessarily unconscious) meanings, processes of coding and theme development, and the potential for some flexibility around the theory that frames the research. We have categorised TA methods into three broad types (Braun et al., 2019):

1. Coding reliability approaches (e.g. Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2012) involve early theme development and conceptualise coding as a process of *identifying* evidence for themes. Themes are typically understood as topic summaries—summaries or overviews of the most frequent things participants said in relation to a particular topic or data collection question—and as entities that reside *in* data, pre-existing any analytic work on the part of the researcher. Coding reliability approaches use a structured approach to coding centred around a coding frame or codebook, and typically require multiple coders working independently to *apply* the coding frame to the data. Researcher subjectivity is conceptualised as 'bias', a potential threat to coding reliability. This threat is managed through the use of multiple coders, measuring the level of 'agreement' between coders, with the assumption that a high level of agreement equals reliable coding, and determining final coding through consensus.
2. Reflexive approaches (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019a; Hayes, 2000) involve later theme development, with themes developed *from* codes, and conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept (Braun et al., 2014). Theme development requires considerable analytic and interpretative work on the part of the researcher. Although themes might encompass data that on the surface appears disparate, such themes unite implicit or latent meaning. Themes cannot exist separately from the researcher—they are *generated* by the researcher through data engagement mediated by all that they bring to this process (e.g. their research values, skills, experience and training). The coding process is unstructured and organic, with the potential for codes to evolve to capture the researcher's deepening understanding of the data. Coding is recognised as an inherently subjective process, one that requires a reflexive researcher—who strives to reflect on their assumptions and how these might shape and delimit their coding. Our reflexive approach involves six—recursive—phases of: *familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up*.
3. Codebook approaches (e.g. King & Brooks, 2018; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) combine the qualitative research values of reflexive TA with the more structured approach to coding, early theme development and the conceptualisation of themes as topic summaries characteristic of coding reliability TA. However, codebook approaches—typically developed for use in applied research—use

a codebook not for the purposes of determining the reliability and accuracy of coding but to chart or map the developing analysis. This is often for pragmatic reasons such as facilitating teamwork, with each member of the team coding different parts of the data set, efficient delivery of analysis to a fixed deadline and meeting predetermined information needs.

There is variation beyond this typology—with TA approaches that defy easy categorisation and combine elements from the different types; there are also versions of 'theme analysis' developed specifically for psychotherapy process research (e.g. Meier et al., 2008).

The three different types of TA can be conceptualised as occupying a continuum, from coding reliability to reflexive approaches. Coding reliability TA exemplifies what has been dubbed 'small q' qualitative (Kidder & Fine, 1987)—the use of qualitative tools and techniques underpinned by (post)positivist² research values (see Ponterotto, 2005). These are the values that typically underpin *quantitative* research and emphasise objective, generalisable, reliable and replicable knowledge as ideal. Reflexive TA, by contrast, exemplifies 'Big Q' qualitative (Kidder & Fine, 1987)—where qualitative research is not merely conceptualised as tools and techniques but as involving the use of these *within* a qualitative values framework. For this reason, Big Q qualitative is sometimes termed 'fully qualitative' research (i.e. research that is qualitative both in techniques and values). Although qualitative research values are not easily defined, they typically include a conceptualisation of researcher subjectivity as a resource for research and of meaning and knowledge as partial, situated and contextual (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

TA is often understood as belonging to the phenomenological or experiential qualitative research tradition, common in counselling and psychotherapy research (Morrow, 2007). This tradition is centred on the exploration of participants' subjective experiences and sense-making (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Willig, 2013). Many coding reliability and codebook authors position their versions of TA within this tradition (e.g. Guest et al., 2012). However, some reflexive and codebook TA authors (e.g. Clarke & Braun, 2014; King, 2012) acknowledge another research tradition—that of *critical* qualitative research. The critical tradition is often associated with poststructuralist (e.g. Gavey, 1989) and constructionist³ (e.g. Gergen, 2015) theoretical frameworks, focusing on the interrogation of socially embedded patterns of meaning and the implications and effects of these (see Clarke & Braun, 2014). The critical qualitative tradition is less well established in counselling and psychotherapy research (Ponterotto et al., 2017), although there are pockets of research *and* practice informed by poststructuralism and constructionism (e.g. narrative therapy and research, see Lainson et al., 2019).

1.3 | What are the differences between thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis?

TA and QCA are often confused and conflated; QCA is probably the analytic approach most like TA (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). How these two

methods differ in part depends on how both TA and QCA are defined. Just as there is no one approach to TA, there is no one approach to QCA. Moreover, just as TA is often (implicitly) presented as a singular approach (e.g. Vaismoradi et al., 2016; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019), so too is QCA (e.g. Burla et al., 2008). Extending the 'different types of TA as siblings in a family' analogy (Fugard & Potts, 2020), it is useful to imagine TA and QCA as two related 'nuclear families', each with lots of children. There is lots of variation within each family, and lots of points of connection, and some differences, between the two families.

QCA *probably* developed from quantitative versions⁴—Mayring (2000; but see Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) described the development of qualitative approaches to content analysis in the middle of the twentieth century (e.g. Kracauer, 1952). QCA is often described as a method for identifying themes in qualitative data (e.g. Cho & Lee, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Vaismoradi et al., 2016), and some researchers even label their approach 'thematic content analysis' (e.g. Brewster et al., 2014). Some definitions of QCA describe a method that is like TA (in general). For example, Hsieh and Shannon (2005) could have been writing a generic definition of TA:

Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words to examining language intensively for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings (Weber, 1990). These categories can represent either explicit communication or inferred communication [...] qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (p. 1,278).

This definition includes reference to processes of coding and theme development (although, as in TA, there is no widely agreed on definition of a theme in QCA), explicit (semantic) and inferred (latent) meaning, and the centrality of researcher subjectivity. With perhaps the exception of an emphasis on researcher subjectivity, these are key features of QCA in many different sources (e.g. Burla et al., 2008; Cho & Lee, 2014; Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Other common features include the possibility of using both inductive and deductive (or conventional and directed) coding approaches, or a combination of the two (e.g. Cho & Lee, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Indeed, some QCA authors argue that 'theme analysis' or TA is just another name for QCA (Schreier, 2012). At the general level, there does seem to be little that separates TA and QCA. However, the variation across TA approaches means QCA overlaps most with codebook and coding reliability TA. Although there is no one widely agreed on set of procedures for QCA, most authors emphasise the use of a codebook or coding frame (e.g. Burla et al., 2008; Forman & Damschroder, 2008; Schreier, 2012) and some discuss practices to ensure and demonstrate coding reliability such as using multiple independent coders and measuring inter-coder agreement (e.g. Burla et al., 2008; Forman & Damschroder, 2008). In contrast, reflexive TA *does* seem to offer the

researcher a distinct approach, one that is *fully* qualitative in terms of both its procedures and the underlying research values.

Although QCA is commonly presented as a method rather than a methodology (Cho & Lee, 2014), theoretical underpinnings are rarely discussed or acknowledged. Indeed, one major difference between QCA and TA seems to be that QCA is often implicitly and sometimes explicitly presented as atheoretical, rather than theoretically flexible (Forman & Damschroder, 2008). Despite such positioning, (post)positivist theoretical assumptions are often imported into the analysis through the use of quality measures like calculating inter-coder agreement and a concern to minimise researcher subjectivity and maximise the 'accuracy' of coding. If theoretical underpinnings are acknowledged, it is usually of the (post)positivist or realist (or 'factist') variety (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The atheoretical positioning of QCA is perhaps why it is often thought of as a method for only producing descriptive analyses (Cho & Lee, 2014; Vaismoradi et al., 2013) and—thus—as the least interpretive of the qualitative analytic approaches, compared to what some claim are the *most* interpretive approaches, such as GT or interpretive phenomenology (e.g. Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This is perhaps why QCA is often framed as a 'starter' method (Vaismoradi et al., 2013), accessible for qualitative beginners, but relatively unsophisticated (as TA is often also misrepresented as).

As TA and QCA seem to be *parallel* developments from quantitative content analysis, and more or less overlap (depending on the version), is it useful to consider them *distinct* methods? Does having different terms clarify, or does it just confuse and complexify, unnecessarily? Our view tends towards the latter, but as both branches of this family of methods are now firmly established, neither will disappear. So why might you choose QCA over TA? This probably largely depends on context, as each method carries more 'cachet' or acceptance and is more widely used in certain contexts. If your approach is more (post)positivist/small q, there is little to distinguish between the two. But—and this is a big but—we are troubled by the (implicit) positioning of QCA as *atheoretical*. Qualitative analysis cannot be atheoretical—no matter what a researcher's purpose, analysis *always* involves theoretical assumptions and choices (Ponterotto et al., 2017). Because there is usually some discussion of theoretical underpinnings within the TA literature (albeit at times limited, and sometimes problematic), we therefore advocate for using TA over QCA—whichever form you use, and for discussing the theoretical bases of the analysis. The framing of TA as theoretically *flexible* means theory *cannot* be avoided (in theory! - see Braun & Clarke, 2020). Furthermore, we prefer the focus on 'themes'—what you're aiming to *get to*—rather than 'content'—what you're working *with*. The latter risks evoking an extractive, 'the truth is in there' orientation to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

1.4 | What are the differences between thematic analysis and interpretative phenomenological analysis?

There are a wide variety of phenomenological approaches (e.g. Finlay, 2011; Paley, 2017), not least TA, which has been used

in phenomenological research since at least the 1980s (e.g. Dapkus, 1985). We focus on IPA here because it is increasingly widely used in counselling and psychotherapy research, with well-developed methodological guidance (McLeod, 2011). As a methodology, IPA specifies: (a) a guiding theoretical framework (phenomenology—which in this version is broadly concerned with understanding and interpreting how human beings experience and make sense of the world); (b) research questions focused on *personal* experience and meaning-making in a particular context; (c) the use of small, homogenous purposive samples; and (d) the use of interviews to collect first-person accounts of personal experience (e.g. Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Spiers & Riley, 2019). There is, however, increasing variation around data collection methods as IPA has evolved from when it was first outlined in the 1990s (e.g. there has been some discussion of using IPA to analyse focus group data; Palmer et al., 2010). As in reflexive TA, researcher subjectivity is a fundamental resource for IPA. Indeed, IPA research has been described as a *fundamentally* human practice, it is: 'merely doing what human beings do. OK, it's doing it in more detail, it's doing it more steadfastly, but nonetheless, it's an essentially human process that is happening in the research's endeavour' (Smith, 2019, p. 171).

Beyond the method/ology question, there are two important differences between reflexive TA and IPA. The first is that IPA incorporates a *dual* analytic focus: both a *thematic* orientation—the identification of themes *across* cases (participants)—and an *idiographic* approach—interest in and focus on the particular and unique details of each case. Second, related in part to this idiographic focus, IPA *procedures* are rather different from TA procedures: IPA involves a detailed focus on the analysis of *each* case, *before* developing themes *across* cases (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This is quite different from theme development in reflexive TA, where themes are developed *across* cases from codes, following the coding of the entire data set. IPA goes analytically much deeper or further with each data item, before taking an overall thematic orientation to develop themes across the data set. Each interview transcript is analysed in full, sequentially, and analytic notes are ideally recorded on the transcripts themselves, encouraging detailed and close engagement with the unique features of each participant's account.

The IPA process begins with 'initial noting': writing detailed notes on the data. These comments can, like in TA, be descriptive (semantic) and stay close to the participants' overt meanings, or conceptual (latent) and reflect an interpretation of the participant's worldview from the standpoint of the researcher. An additional aspect of initial noting in IPA is a focus on language use: Smith et al. (2009) encouraged attention to 'pronoun use, pauses, laughter, functional aspects of language, repetition, tone, degree of fluency (articulate or hesitant)' (p. 88) as well as metaphor. A focus on metaphor may help the researcher to grasp more conceptual meanings. In IPA, language is assumed to reflect and communicate what people think and feel, which differs profoundly from how language is theorised in DA and other critical qualitative approaches (see Willig, 2013). These initial notes are similar to the familiarisation notes the researcher makes

in the first phase of reflexive TA, but they are generally more formalised, systematic and detailed.

The next step involves the development of 'emergent (or inductive) themes' for the same participant (these are somewhat akin to codes in reflexive TA, see Braun & Clarke, 2013). A process of searching for connections *across* emergent themes leads to the development of 'super-ordinate themes' related to that participant—these are somewhat akin to themes in reflexive TA, but can be more like topic summaries, with shared meaning connected to emergent themes.

This process is then repeated for *each* interview. Finally, the researcher seeks to develop a list of super-ordinate themes for all of the participants. These 'master themes' typically provide structure and organisation for the analysis; what is reported *in detail* are the emergent themes. The way themes are conceptualised in IPA, both in relation to emergent and super-ordinate themes is—like with TA—messy. Sometimes, themes presented are akin to 'topic summaries'—this seems particularly evident for super-ordinate themes. Other times, themes appear to report meaning-based patterns organised around a central concept.

Our brief summary of IPA, and methodological descriptions by key authors, including British psychologist Smith, could be called the 'textbook' version of IPA and is exemplified by their empirical work (e.g. Eatough & Smith, 2010; Rhodes et al., 2019; Smith & Osborne, 2007). This can be rather different from how IPA is enacted by the wider research community (much like with TA; see Braun & Clarke, 2020). It seems to us that IPA is quite often used as a method *for doing* TA on very small samples, and to produce rather 'light' descriptive analyses that show little regard for the wider social context of participants' sense-making. Such use fails the potential of both TA and IPA. We are not alone in this assessment. IPA methodologists have been critical of the way IPA is often used (e.g. Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 2011), and particularly the neglect of the social world as the 'constituent ground of personhood' (Larkin et al., 2011, p. 324), as have those less sympathetic to IPA (e.g. Chamberlain, 2011; Parker, 2005). What this (mis)use of IPA means is that the 'output' of an IPA can be little different from the output of a phenomenological TA, but usually with a smaller sample. But these approaches should be different.

Spiers and Riley (2019) are unusual in providing a reflection of using both reflexive TA⁵ and IPA to produce different analyses from one data set of interviews with 47 GPs living with distress. TA was used to analyse the full data set (within a critical realist⁶ theoretical framework, to align with the philosophical underpinnings of IPA and with an inductive orientation and focus on semantic meaning). An IPA was conducted on a 'demographically homogenous' (p. 278) subset of 10 interviews. The authors suggested their TA produced breadth, while the IPA produced depth, but acknowledged that the smaller sample for the IPA allowed for more in-depth engagement with each interview (taking time over analysis is something we emphasise, Braun & Clarke, in press), and that a focus on latent meaning would have resulted in a TA analysis 'that looked more like IPA' (p. 284). They noted difficulty in shifting analytic orientation in terms of

how they were reading and interpreting the data, but concluded that IPA and TA 'work well together as methods' (p. 287).

Assuming a researcher is just using one approach, and conducting a broadly experiential or phenomenological study, when might it make sense to use reflexive TA instead of IPA? We recommend TA instead of IPA when the requirements or focus of IPA are not well met by a study. For instance:

- The research question is focused on something other than (just) *personal* experience and sense-making.
- The data source is something other than interviews or another method that gathers in-depth first-person accounts of personal experience and sense-making.
- The sample is relatively large (i.e. larger than $N = 10$) and/or heterogeneous—such as when the aim is to capture diversity (Fassinger, 2005).
- The analytic focus is solely on identifying themes across the data set, rather than also on the unique features of individual cases.
- The need for the research to have 'actionable outcomes' with clear implications for practice (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012) requires organising the analysis into 'thematic statements' (shared meaning-based themes).
- The analytic interest is on how personal experiences are located within wider socio-cultural contexts.

1.5 | What are the differences between thematic analysis and grounded theory?

GT was originally developed by US sociologists Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s—at a time when qualitative research was not the established concept with a vast *range* of methods it has become (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). GT concepts and practices have gone on to influence many ideas across qualitative inquiry, often implicitly (and sometimes without good justification—such as in the pervasive concept of saturation; Braun & Clarke, 2019b). Glaser and Strauss (1965, 1967) aimed to establish an approach to research that *grounded* sociological theories in empirical evidence (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). Early grounded theories were broad in scope, involving what would now be regarded as large samples for qualitative research, and concurrent processes of data collection and analysis. For instance, intensive fieldwork at six hospitals, including observations lasting two to four weeks on at least nine different types of wards or services, and 'extensive interview data on nursing students' encounters with death' in Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 289) or 73 interviews in Charmaz (1983). The procedures and assumptions of early GT arguably reflected both Glaser's commitment to positivism and Strauss' interests in symbolic interactionism, a sociological theory concerned with the creation of meaning and social order through human actions and interactions (Charmaz, 2014). Glaser and Strauss split intellectually and developed their own versions of GT (e.g. Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Some of their PhD students, most notably Charmaz

(2014), have also developed their own versions of GT. There are also variants developed for use within specific fields including psychotherapy process research (Rennie, 2006). Identifying the differences between reflexive TA and GT, then, is complex, because there are so many different versions of GT.⁷

Many grounded theorists argue that GT should be focused on particular types of research questions—such as social processes, and the factors that influence, underpin and shape particular phenomena (Charmaz, 2014). However, researchers tend to use GT to address a much wider variety of research questions—in counselling and psychotherapy research this is often questions focused on lived experience (e.g. Lillie, 2006). Interviewing has been the typical method of data collection, but a wider range of data collection techniques is possible, such as ethnographic field work/observational methods, secondary sources (e.g. Government documents, media items), qualitative surveys, solicited diaries, photographs and videos (see Charmaz, 2014).

Ranging from Glaser's (1992) positivist iteration to Charmaz's (2014) constructivist re-working, the various versions of GT have different theoretical underpinnings; there are also mostly minor divergences in analytic procedures. Across these versions, the GT analytic process generally involves different stages or 'levels' of coding—moving from initial or 'open' (line-by-line) coding to more 'selective', 'integrative' or 'focused' (broader, higher level, more abstract, interpretive or conceptually oriented) coding (Birks & Mills, 2015). Grounded theorists distinguish between codes, concepts and categories (these terms *are* also often conflated *in use*)—categories loosely map onto themes in reflexive TA. Generally, the output of a GT is a core concept/category and/or cluster of sometimes hierarchically related concepts/categories. The later stages of coding, and particularly coding aimed at category development, broadly map onto theme development processes in reflexive TA. However, GT does not seem to have such a clear sense of transition between two 'levels' of analysis (codes/themes) as TA has—something particularly evident in reflexive TA where themes are developed *from* codes.

GT is influential, with coding strategies developed by grounded theorists—such as line-by-line coding and constant comparative analysis—often attributed to TA (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). We are sometimes described as advocates of these strategies within reflexive TA, which we are not (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Charmaz (2014), in contrast, noted that the use of line-by-line coding is precisely what distinguishes GT from a 'general thematic analysis' (p. 125). Line-by-line coding has different meanings—from fine-grained coding to generating a code for every line of data (Charmaz, 2014)—and can be preceded by segmenting or parsing the data into chunks (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996). Whichever meaning applies, coding is approached differently in reflexive TA: data do not need to be segmented for analysis, not all data (lines) need to have codes applied, and coding can be as fine grained or as coarse as is required to address the aims and purpose of the research. 'Constant comparative analysis' is a complex name for what is effectively a strategy of comparing bits of data with other bits of data, codes with codes and

categories with categories, in order to make sense of the data, and code and analyse it effectively (Birks & Mills, 2015). In the broadest sense, all forms of qualitative data analysis involve consideration of whether a specific segment of data is, for example, best coded with this code or that code, or evidence of this or that process, and so on—making the ‘idea’ encapsulated by constant comparative analysis core in good qualitative practice generally. But as a *named* and *systematised* technique, constant comparative analysis is *specifically* associated with GT.

A fully realised GT often centres on the development of a core category that encompasses and explains the GT *as a whole*, alongside various subsidiary categories related to the core category (Birks & Mills, 2015). GT is now very often used in an abbreviated form we have sometimes referred to as ‘GT-lite’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). Although many of the essential procedures of GT, such coding and categorising, memo writing and constant comparative analysis, are used, samples tend to be smaller and relatively homogenous, rather than the ‘maximum variation’ samples often associated with GT (Fassinger, 2005). In GT-lite versions, data collection and analysis is not necessarily concurrent. Charmaz and Thornberg (2020) recently emphasised that concurrent data collection and analysis—samples developed in concert *with* analysis through the use of ‘theoretical sampling’, where the developing analysis informs the ongoing selection of participants—is a defining feature of GT. Saturation, a key notion around sampling and analytic development for GT (broadly defined as the point at which theoretical sampling/data collection ceases), is often watered down to the point at which data collection is generating ‘no new insights’ (Braun & Clarke, 2019b). ‘Saturation’ is often determined by the researcher’s *impression* of the data during data collection, rather than on detailed concurrent data analysis. In contrast, *theoretical* saturation in early GT represented the point at which the properties of categories and the relationships between categories were fully explained so that a *grounded* theory could arise (Morse, 2015). Finally, the analytic output from an abbreviated GT is a set of categories or themes and an understanding of the relationship between these categories (sometimes represented in the form of a model). This abbreviated use of GT often produces an analysis that is, effectively, indistinguishable from that of TA.

Given the potential for similar analysis, when might you use reflexive TA rather than GT? Our response reflects our position that conceptualising ‘GT’ simply as techniques for identifying themes both does disservice to GT, and fails to utilise a better-suited method. So, our advice is to use reflexive TA when one or more of the following apply:

- When a researcher is beginning their qualitative research journey. TA is more straightforward than GT, the procedures are fewer and less complex, and there is a clearer pathway through them.
- The research questions are *not* those particularly suited to GT (the definitive GT research question centres on social processes).
- The goal is to identify patterns in data, to describe and interpret those patterns, and/or to provide a theoretically informed interpretation of them.

- The researcher does not intend to develop a *grounded theory* from the data set and analysis.
- Data are collected independent from the analytic development (i.e. there is no intention to sample theoretically).
- The sample is relatively small and/or homogenous—as is often the case with samples of ‘convenience’ that are common in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013).
- Time is limited by a particular and tight deadline. Reflexive TA, while not quick, can be faster than a ‘full’ GT project.

1.6 | What are the differences between thematic analysis and (pattern-based) discourse analysis?

DA has long been *the* defining approach of *critical* qualitative research. All forms of DA are underpinned by a view of language as a social practice, something active and performative, doing things, and bringing forth realities, rather than merely transparently reflecting participants’ thoughts and feelings. Thus, DA can be understood as focusing on *language practice* (Braun & Clarke, 2013). But, as with GT, specific approaches to DA vary widely, even just within the social and health sciences. Some—such as discursive psychology (Wiggins, 2016), an approach informed by conversation analysis (Madill et al., 2001)—are more focused on the micro details of language practice. Others—such as interpretative repertoire analysis (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and poststructuralist DA (Gavey, 1989)—focus more on broader discursive patterns or ways of talking about a topic. There are many more variations.

Reflexive TA does *not* provide tools for a detailed and fine-grained analysis of language practice that some discourse analytic approaches offer. But, when implemented within a *critical* qualitative theoretical framework of some kind (e.g. constructionism [Gergen, 2015], poststructuralism [Gavey, 1989]), it *can* offer something akin to what we have elsewhere described as *pattern-based* discursive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These include the aforementioned interpretative repertoire analysis and, particularly, poststructuralist DA. We dubbed these pattern-based DA because their overriding analytic focus is on more macro patterns of meaning—whether called ‘discourses’ or ‘interpretative repertoires’—in data, rather than on the more micro details of language practice. For example, in an interpretative repertoire analysis of interviews with Christian counselling clients who chose to work with a Christian therapist, Greenidge and Baker (2012) developed a ‘client discourse’ and a ‘Christian discourse’, each constituted by two interpretative repertoires. The authors explored how these repertoires (e.g. ‘counselling is a business deal’ and ‘counsellors are professionals trained to help’) constructed counselling, therapists and the therapeutic relationships and positioned the clients. We imagine that a reflexive TA of the same data, informed by constructionism or poststructuralism, could produce a very similar analysis.

Beyond this similarity between pattern-based DA and reflexive TA, Terry (2016) argued the theoretical flexibility of reflexive TA

'makes it ideally suited to [...] a pluralistic analytic approach' (p. 104). He perceived much value in using TA *in combination with* discursive approaches, describing this particular rendition of reflexive TA as 'critical TA'.

There are also established *discursive* approaches that combine elements of TA and DA within their method, including thematic decomposition (Stenner, 1993; Stenner et al., 2010) and thematic DA (Singer & Hunter, 1999; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Thematic decomposition is the more widely used of these two approaches and is most strongly associated with British critical psychologist Stenner (1993). The approach is situated within a discursive framework in which meanings are conceptualised as socially constituted through linguistic and other signifying practices. Thematic decomposition involves coding and the identification of themes, similar to codebook approaches to TA, with themes developed within a poststructuralist framework (Stenner et al., 2010). Poststructuralist discursive approaches are often concerned with the discursive production of personhood and the ways in which discourses make available particular subject positions, or 'discursive locations from which to speak and act' (Willig, 2013, p. 132). The influence of poststructuralism on thematic decomposition is apparent in the notion that themes relate to subjective meanings (e.g. Stenner et al., 2010), subjectivities (e.g. Gurevich et al., 2007) or subject positions (e.g. Ussher et al., 2014).

When and why would you use reflexive TA within a constructionist or poststructuralist theoretical framework, or combine TA with elements from DA, rather than utilise pattern-based DA? Given that there is considerable overlap in what these methods can provide, our response here reflects mainly pragmatic reasons. We feel that critical forms of reflexive TA are more useful when one or more of the following apply:

- When a researcher is fairly new to qualitative research. Reflexive TA offers much in the way of practical guidance (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Braun et al., 2014, 2019), whereas the procedures for DA are less concrete and often based in concepts, ideas and practices, rather than guidelines. When guidance is provided (e.g. by Willig, 2013), it can be still somewhat opaque and hard to grasp and apply without a good theoretical and methodological grounding. This can add anxiety to the process.
- When a researcher is not certain they are committed to a full discourse orientation in their analysis.
- The research questions and interests are *not* solely or primarily oriented to the *effects* of language (such as subject positions).

2 | SUMMARY

This paper is designed as a tool to help counselling and psychotherapy researchers decide which of several across-case analytic approaches suits their research. We introduced the TA family of methods, and compared and contrasted *reflexive* TA with four other influential

qualitative analytic methods and methodologies: QCA; IPA; GT; and DA. We briefly outlined some of the philosophical and procedural differences *and similarities* between TA and each method/ology, and we offered our assessment of when a researcher might choose reflexive TA over the other approach—and, by inference, when the other approach might better be used. We do not claim this mapping of pattern-based approaches and compare and contrast exercise as neutral (nor as exhaustive⁸). As TA authors, we are not neutral evaluators; the mapping no doubt reflects our training in psychology and our research values (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2019a). We have clear ideas about what constitutes good and bad practice in qualitative research, and specifically in TA (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2020). Other accounts of across-case approaches in counselling and psychotherapy research (e.g. McLeod, 2011; Yeh & Inman, 2007) map the terrain rather differently. McLeod (2011) described TA and IPA as variants of GT, whereas we view these approaches as originating in traditions (content analysis and phenomenology, respectively) that long pre-dated GT. As in the doing of qualitative analysis, our subjectivity informs the process of conceptualising and mapping qualitative research.

What we have attempted here is to problematise the idea that there is—always—one *perfect* analytic method/ology for across-case qualitative analysis. We hope we have shown that often more than one approach would deliver similar results, or allow a researcher to address their research question. In comparing these approaches, and addressing 'when TA' questions, we aim to encourage not widespread thoughtless uptake of TA, but an approach to thinking about method that avoids the 'hallowed method' quest, and instead involves *thoughtful* and deliberative practice in choosing and using analytic approaches.

ORCID

Virginia Braun  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3435-091X>

Victoria Clarke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9405-7363>

ENDNOTES

¹ A type of discourse analysis informed by poststructuralist theory—which views language and discourse as constitutive of reality and integral to the operation of power as a productive force in society, producing meaning and subjectivity. Poststructuralist DA tends to have a strong interest in power, and in contesting and challenging dominant—powerful—knowledge. It also understands the self and subjectivity as not unitary or coherent, but fragmented and contradictory, and produced through discourse (see Gavey, 1989, for an accessible overview of poststructuralist theory and DA).

² Post-positivism is a refinement of positivism—the influence of the researcher on research outcomes is recognised but objective knowledge remains the ideal. The term '(post)positivism' captures the blurring of these two closely related sets of values.

³ Constructionism (sometimes social constructionism) is a theoretical tradition that views reality and truth—or realities and truths as it rejects the idea of a singular reality and truth—as produced (constructed) through language, representation and other social processes. The terms in which the world is understood are seen as related to specific socio-political, cultural and historical contexts,

and meanings are seen as social artefacts, resulting from social interaction, rather than some inherent truth about the nature of reality (see Gergen, 2015).

⁴ TA is similarly thought to have evolved from quantitative content analysis (Joffe, 2012).

⁵ Their use and description of reflexive TA is not quite how we have described it, and the language (e.g. emergent codes and themes), conceptualisation of themes (topic summaries) and analytic process described (use of 'subcodes' and a codebook, analysis transcript by transcript) partly reflect an IPA influence.

⁶ Critical realism is a form of realism that frequently underpins qualitative research. Unlike 'simple' or 'naïve' realism, which assumes a singular reality that can be directly observed or discovered through research, critical realism is premised on the assumption that how we experience reality is shaped by culture, language and political interests (see Maxwell, 2012).

⁷ We find Birks and Mills (2015) an accessible starting point for reading about GT.

⁸ There are other pattern-based methodologies—like consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., 1997)—that have elements of various different approaches we have described here (e.g. in the case of CQR, coding reliability TA and constructivist GT); CQR is relatively unique however in not advocating for coherence in underlying research values.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Virginia Braun is Professor in the School of Psychology at The University of Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand. She is a feminist and critical (health) psychologist, and her research explores the intersecting areas of gender, bodies, sex/sexuality, health and (now) food. She also has an ongoing interest in qualitative research and (with Victoria Clarke) wrote the award-winning textbook *Successful Qualitative Research* (Sage). They have written extensively on thematic analysis (with various co-authors) and are finishing a new book *Thematic Analysis*, for Sage. She co-edited *Collecting Qualitative Data* (Cambridge University Press) with Victoria and Debra Gray—which introduces a range of methods for collecting qualitative data beyond the widely used interview or focus group—and is interested in other methods like qualitative story completion. She is on Twitter @ginnybraun.

Victoria Clarke is Associate Professor of Qualitative and Critical Psychology at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK, where she teaches and supervises on a professional doctorate in counselling psychology programme and other psychotherapy programmes. Her research interests focus on the intersecting areas of sexuality and gender, appearance and embodiment, and family and relationships. With Virginia Braun (and others), she has written extensively about thematic analysis and they are currently co-authoring a book, *Thematic Analysis*, for Sage. Her other books include *Successful Qualitative Research* (Sage) and *Collecting Qualitative Data* (Cambridge). She also has a particular interest in developing survey and story completion methods for qualitative research. You can follow her on Twitter @dricviclarke where she regularly tweets about thematic analysis and qualitative research.

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