



Revisiting Grounded Therapy. Discussing the Idea of a Modified Application of Grounded Theory as a Tool for Self-Reflection in Therapeutic Processes

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Abstract

Grounded Theory is a conceptual model that applies qualitative analysis methods from Grounded Theory Methodology to identify and understand unconscious patterns that may be useful in psychotherapy settings. The approach involves collecting data such as conversation transcripts and journal entries, which are then collaboratively coded with the client in the therapeutic context. This process aims to decipher emotional conflicts or behavioral patterns, fostering the client's self-reflection and uncovering unconscious dynamics that can inform therapeutic interventions.

The intervention method adopts a structured yet participatory approach, empowering clients to take an active role in their therapy. In the future, AI-powered tools could support this process by facilitating audio recording and transcription. Grounded Therapy offers new perspectives for understanding and addressing psychological conflicts while strengthening the therapeutic alliance between therapist and client.

Keywords: grounded therapy, grounded theory, self-reflection, qualitative methods, psychoanalysis, therapeutic processes, mental health

Background

In the conventional application of Grounded Theory Methodology for analyzing interviews, certain passages repeatedly emerged from the data that provided unexpected insights during the coding process. These passages suggested that the interviewees were likely unaware of underlying emotions, conflicts, or contradictions.

An exemplary case is an interview conducted in the context of reconstructing coping strategies following experiences of forced migration (Author, 2016, Interview 2; Author, 2019). In this interview, a 24-year-old man recounts his escape from persecution by the Taliban, describing both the decision to flee and the challenges faced during the journey, as well as his living conditions in Germany. The coding of the interview with Grounded Theory led to the discovery of concepts that were not explicitly addressed by the interviewee but could be relevant for psychotherapeutic conversations and interventions.

The coding process revealed several explicit and implicit insecurities and unconscious conflicts. A striking example is the interviewee's hesitation when describing 'special groups' (Taliban). He repeatedly clears his throat, pauses, and searches for the right words. These linguistic uncertainties indicate the interviewee may have difficulties speaking about these groups, suggesting a deeper insecurity or fear.

Ja, eh it is eh different reasons I come, because of insecurity and eh I had some special problems (clears his throat) with special groups (.) and because of that I come to Europe (...) special groups that are against the government eh against eh social activities that I had in society, I worked as a teacher ehh in eh private educational center and eh (.) eh there (clears his throat) are Taliban groups and (.) ehh some other local (.) different groups that they're upset of government and eh (.) eh upset of eh education, upset of

foreign countries that they works in Afghanistan and they (clears his throat) works in eh, educational centers, like this (ibid.).

This aligns with his ambiguous stance on his expectations for life in Germany. When asked about his expectations, he states he 'made no decision' (but rather the smuggler did) and that he 'suddenly' chose Germany. These contradictory statements reflect an uncertainty regarding the escape and the decision-making processes involved.

And eh suddenly eh it was not optional for me, suddenly I decide to (.) eh go to Germany, it was eh (.) eh (clears his throat) like this that eh the eh gumbeler, I think the word is gumbeler, a person who transfer the people (.) ja. They take money and eh they transfer people to different countrys and suddenly I choose Germany (.) (clears his throat) (.) Mhh I mh didn't had any (.) idea (.) that eh I go to, for example, which country of Europe, but eh (clears his throat) at the end eh when suddenly I decide to Germany, I had some information before about the (clears his throat) history of Germany and rich culture of Germany and eh I had ehh (.) I decided before to (.) continue my education (ibid.).

Further unconscious concepts and conflicts became apparent in the interviewee's emotional detachment from his experiences. Although he speaks about life-threatening situations, such as the danger of being on the Taliban's list, he does not use direct emotional expressions or strong words. This detached representation could indicate unconscious repression or a coping strategy to deal with traumatic experiences. 'A bit of a problem' is quite an understatement when you're on the Taliban's blacklist.

Mh, they know where I work before and eh if I went to that province or district, maybe (.) eh I faced a problem and eh I was like eh they have a list, I was on their list that this

person helped governments, ja, it was like a black list, maybe they search for me or, ja (.) maybe I faced a bit (.) problem (ibid.).

Similarly, his repeated emphasis on 'helping the homeland' reveals an internal conflict between the desire to support his country and the real danger preventing his return. This suggests an unconscious tension between these two needs.

One final text example will illustrate how many concepts can be contained within a brief monologue. In the following passage, several psychological patterns are addressed, including loneliness, emotional support, stress management, and the impact of challenging living conditions. The speaker mentions feelings of sadness experienced at the beginning of their arrival in the new country due to loneliness, as well as the emotional support they receive from their faith and friends. At the same time, he describes the psychological strain caused by inadequate housing and noisy living environments. These concepts reflect the complex emotional and mental challenges often associated with the refugee experience. In a typical psychotherapy session, it would likely be possible to focus on just one central pattern, as the wide range of issues and the fleeting nature of verbal communication mean that many aspects are either lost or only superficially addressed.

Ja ehm (clears his throat) when something is problematic for me, according to psychology ja, we're muslim, that eh good help us that we have eh belief to a big power, that eh we eh we're (clears his throat) mh we have a desire for our future, and eh (.) eh praying help me, but according to material things ja, my friend help me that he lived, he is eh my roommate, and eh some other friends that if I need money, ja I can ask money for ehh (.) and also (.) eh (..) but eh (.) I didn't face eh to a special pr.. eh problem, jet in here, that eh, at the beginning that I coming here, I was alone, ja (.) I become (.) eh sad

sometimes (.) ja not any special problems that eh someone make for me a big problem, ja (.) it was eh like normal, that (...) it is normal that a person who come to a new country, new society, ja (.) eh maybe some things are (.) not good, for example the living (.) mh the apartment that we live ehm there're, a lot of eh refugees and peoples that they come from different countries,(.) ja, there is very noisy or (.) eh we didn... we don't have a lot of facilities, just we have a small room for two person, and eh ja it is very dark (.) ja (clears his throat) but eh this kind of thing is not eh too much important, the most important thing is the behavior of people or government about eh the refugees and (.) eh also (.) a future is very important that ehh how can we study or work is important for me, that eh (.) ja (clears his throat) (.) eh, I wish that eh (..) eh in the future I can study (ibid.)

The analysis of various interviews demonstrated that coding not only captures the explicit content of the interviews but also makes deeper, unconscious aspects of the interviewees visible. Emotional tensions, implicit contradictions, and unspoken conflicts emerge, which the interviewees may not have fully recognized or articulated during the conversation. These unconscious dimensions of the interviews become central through the coding process, highlighting how the methodology can contribute to uncovering latent meanings and dynamics within the data.

Uncovering such initially unconscious connections is precisely what makes the possibilities of a detailed analysis using Grounded Theory promising. While such connections may also be recognized in conversation, the detailed analysis enabled by Grounded Theory allows for a more in-depth examination.

This builds on the idea, originally introduced by Simmons (1994), of harnessing the coding process of Grounded Theory as a means to facilitate in-depth reflection within therapeutic

contexts. In this article, the focus lies on the application of Grounded Therapy (ibid.) as an approach for self-reflection in psychotherapeutic contexts. To this end, the foundations and principles of Grounded Theory Methodology were modified and adapted to support self-reflection in therapeutic processes, with the aim of discussing practice-oriented possibilities for its implementation.

Self-reflection refers to the process in which individuals critically examine and analyze their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and values to develop a deeper understanding of themselves. This process supports the development of self-awareness and enables individuals to recognize personal strengths and weaknesses, reconsider decisions, and evaluate their actions in relation to their goals and values (Neenan & Dryden, 2006).

In psychotherapy, self-reflection plays a central role, particularly in approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy, where it helps identify and modify dysfunctional thought patterns (Beck, 2011). In social science research, self-reflection is also employed as a method to critically analyze researchers' subjectivity and minimize potential biases in data interpretation (Finlay, 2002). It serves as a quality assurance tool, allowing for a conscious engagement with one's own positioning and the associated influences on the research process.

Building on a modified version of Grounded Theory Methodology, this work advances an interdisciplinary approach aimed at enhancing self-reflection within psychotherapeutic settings, with a focus on exploring practice-oriented applications.

Self-reflection in Qualitative Research

The subjectivity of researchers within the framework of qualitative studies is a central aspect in the process of data collection and analysis. Even before data collection begins, choices such as the formulation of the research question and the selection of a particular method can

already influence the outcomes. Self-reflection in the research process serves to make the perspective through which the data were interpreted transparent, thereby contributing to intersubjective verifiability (Steinke, 1999).

In qualitative methods, analysis is often carried out from the perspective of the interpretative paradigm, which assumes that each individual's truth is the result of his or her personal interpretations (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). This relative, pre-interpreted truth must then be deconstructed through further interpretations within the research process (Lamnek, 2005). While Glaser (1978) originally emphasized an epistemological stance distinct from interpretivism, within therapeutic contexts, an interpretative approach can remain valuable, as it emphasizes individual meaning-making, which is central to processes of self-reflection and personal insight.

Moreover, while one of the foundational tenets of Grounded Theory is to limit preconceptions in the research process, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that the researcher's conceptualizations may still be shaped by subjective expectations. Therefore, especially during the evaluation of results, it is crucial to engage critically and reflexively with the issue of subjectivity (Breuer, 2005). This is where self-reflection comes into play. It is important for the researcher to become aware, through self-reflection, of how one's own perspective might influence the conceptualization of the data. Although it is impossible to approach the data completely openly and without prejudice, if a researcher becomes conscious, for instance, of his or her preconceptions regarding the study population and the potential impact of these on the findings, there is an opportunity to distance oneself, at least partially, from one's own perspective. This, in turn, allows for a more open approach to uncovering new insights within the material (ibid.).

Accordingly, it is recommended that researchers in the context of qualitative social research take the time, prior to commencing a study, to reflect on their own preconceptions and expectations. This reflection should also include an examination of one's own positionality in the field of research and the closeness to the subjects under investigation. Such reflection provides the researcher with the opportunity, during data analysis, to discern whether one is truly seeking new phenomena or merely confirmation of pre-existing opinions (ibid.). To document the background of one's conceptualizations and ideas, it is also recommended to maintain a research diary and to regularly write memos (Strauss, 1987).

To free oneself from one's own preconceptions when conceptualizing material, it is also advisable to evaluate data in research groups. The introduction of alternative perspectives can challenge individual conceptualizations and opens up the horizon for other possible readings (Steinke, 1999).

Self-reflection facilitates the discovery of new elements within the collected material. The information gained through explorations of the individual case is subsequently compared with other cases (e.g., through theoretical sampling) to identify structures and patterns in the data that apply to more than just a single individual (Corbin, 2003).

In summary, self-reflection enables an adequate consideration of the attitudes of the participants. The insights gained from this reflexive analytical process, in turn, contain detailed information about the participants, even aspects that only emerge during the analysis and of which the participants themselves may not be aware.

Drawing on prior research experience, it has been observed that interested interviewees sometimes receive the overall results or a completed article via email after the conclusion of a project. However, a deeper engagement with the insights derived from the specific individual

case is not common practice within the research process. Once an interview or observation is completed, the person under study is typically excluded from the analysis process, despite the potential of this hermeneutic practice to help them gain a better understanding of themselves, reflect on their own attitudes and actions, and perhaps even critically question them. Could it be possible, then, to use the insights derived from the analysis of the individual case for the self-reflection and personal development of the participants themselves?

Self-reflection in Psychotherapy

Self-reflection plays a central role in psychotherapy, both for clients and therapists. It is particularly important during therapeutic training, and throughout clinical practice, that therapists critically examine their own methods, the therapeutic relationship, as well as their prejudices and limitations, in order to ensure professional and ethical conduct (Gale & Schröder, 2014; Prasko et al., 2023).

Depending on the individual's problems and level of distress, psychotherapy may pursue various objectives, however, the overarching aim in psychotherapeutic practice is generally to improve the quality of life for clients seeking help for a range of mental challenges (Lindhiem et al., 2016). Through diverse methods, each with distinct focal points yet often sharing similar procedures, the process of dialogue is employed to achieve a common goal: the alleviation of psychological symptoms and the enhancement of well-being.

To illustrate, consider several well-known psychotherapeutic approaches. In behavior therapy, the focus is on identifying and modifying dysfunctional cognitive and behavioral patterns. Psychoanalysis employs dialogue to uncover unconscious conflicts, motives, and emotions with the aim of transforming them. Systemic approaches concentrate on improving dynamics within social systems, most notably within families. Positive psychology, on the other

hand, deals with identifying strengths and resources to bolster clients' resilience (Carr et al., 2020).

In all these therapeutic modalities, self-reflection, alongside other processes (e.g., the therapeutic relationship), plays a decisive role. Under guided conditions, clients are encouraged to develop a better understanding of themselves, ideally leading to personal changes that enhance their well-being. For example, in addressing anxiety disorders, a client may, during therapy sessions, reflect on the origins of their anxiety, whether rooted in traumatic experiences or dysfunctional thought patterns and beliefs. Self-reflection further facilitates the identification of triggers and stressors and may even help uncover destructive behavioral patterns that exacerbate anxiety. The quest for effective strategies to manage anxiety and develop coping mechanisms begins with reflecting on potential pathways that might aid the individual.

Therapeutic processes utilize a variety of methods tailored to the individual needs of clients to promote self-reflection, with talk therapy often serving as the central approach in many psychotherapeutic methods. Through conversational techniques, clients are enabled to reflect upon their thoughts and feelings, thus facilitating the processing and resolution of problems (Davidsen, 2008). Written forms of self-exploration are also frequently used in therapy, for instance, keeping diaries or writing letters to record daily emotions, events, and reactions. Such methods serve to reveal recurring patterns through self-reflection, techniques that are similarly utilized by therapists in training to reflect upon their own work (Fahrrand, Perry, & Linsley, 2010).

Increasingly, creative methods are being incorporated to process emotions and foster self-reflection. Art therapy, for example, involves creative processes such as painting, modeling, or other artistic expressions that enable clients to explore their inner experiences on a non-verbal

level. Creative methods are particularly valuable when addressing complex topics and emotions that are difficult to articulate. Throughout the process, clients may reflect on how their internal states manifest, how decisions are made, and how challenges are managed. Moreover, a completed artwork can provide insight into unconscious emotions and conflicts, thereby supporting self-reflection and the healing process. Similar approaches are employed in music and drama therapies (Brooke, 2006).

Nature-based therapies and green care also provide clients with opportunities for self-reflection through interactions with nature, mindfulness techniques, or animal-assisted interventions (Petzold, Orth, & Sieper, 2015). For instance, working with horses can offer multiple avenues for self-reflection, as the challenges encountered with the animal may prompt reflections on one's everyday behaviors (Author, 2023). Group therapy constitutes another method that facilitates self-reflection. In a group setting, the diversity of perspectives and feedback can challenge clients to reexamine their own realities, while the group dynamics themselves may mirror internal processes and further stimulate self-reflection (Logren et al., 2017).

It is evident that self-reflection in the therapeutic process operates on multiple levels and unlocks the potential for significant change. Self-reflection represents the first step toward transformation and the improvement of one's situation. Consequently, it is worthwhile to consider approaches like Grounded Therapy that expand the repertoire of methods available to foster self-reflection.

The core idea: Grounded Therapy according to Simmons (1994)

Simmons (1994) criticizes how preconceived notions and the pathologization of individuals can burden the therapeutic relationship, often occupying too much space within the

client's self-concept. These preconceptions are further reinforced by gathering extensive information about the client before therapy begins, including diagnoses made according to standardized guidelines. Similarly, the creation of a treatment plan leads to an early fixation on specific ideas. This is considered problematic because it is often viewed uncritically as something that positively influences the process, even though it unilaterally shapes the therapeutic mindset.

These diagnoses influence how to think about the client in the long term, leading to a "pseudo-analytical process" (ibid., p. 11) in which the complexity of the client is confined to a predefined structure. However, Simmons notes that this process causes the client to begin incorporating the label into their own self-concept, ultimately identifying with it.

Grounded Theory offers a solution by encouraging therapists to move beyond preconceived ideas and engage with the client in a more individualized manner. Rather than imposing externally derived themes, Grounded Theory allows for concepts to emerge from within, based on the client's relevant concerns. As Simmons states, the perspective of the therapist often takes precedence over that of the client. Grounded Theory represents an attempt to organize the therapeutic process in a way that minimizes the influence of preconceptions. In an analytical process guided by the client's relevances, data are derived from conversations. This process leads to an inductive approach, in which the client becomes a "co-analyst" (ibid., p. 21). The therapist, in this process, learns what is relevant for the client and what works, fostering a much more individualized and open approach to therapy.

Grounded Therapy (Simmons, 1994) is inspired by the methodological principles of classic Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). It follows an inductive and

emergent logic grounded in empirical data. The primary aim is to develop conceptual categories that explain patterns in a client's subjective experience.

A key tenet of classic Grounded Theory is conceptual abstraction. The therapist does not interpret the client's narratives in light of preformulated psychological theories but identifies recurring patterns of meaning by coding data and comparing them constantly (ebd.). These comparisons allow for the emergence of abstract categories, grounded in the data itself.

The method is structured by the constant comparative method, through which incidents in the data are compared with each other and with emerging codes and categories. This principle ensures that categories are not merely descriptive but increasingly abstract and theoretically meaningful (Glaser, 1978). Even when narratives contain metaphorical or emotional expressions, the goal is not to interpret them psychologically but to code them conceptually and comparatively, thereby generating theory grounded in data (Simmons, 1994).

Simmons (1994) identifies the coding process as a central element of Grounded Therapy. During the initial phase of open coding, all data perceived as relevant is coded without the intention of finding solutions at this stage. This is followed by constant comparative analysis, in which emerging concepts are systematically compared to identify recurring patterns. Over time, key issues or problems begin to take shape, allowing for the transition to selective coding. Theoretical codes can offer insights into the relationships between categories and support their integration into a Grounded Theory rooted in the client's narrative.

In terms of practical implementation, Simmons offers limited concrete guidance. He notes that "most coding will have to be conducted in process [...] much of the coding must occur solely in the therapist's mind" (ibid., p. 30). This simultaneity of data collection and analysis, referred to by Simmons as "coding from the hip" (ibid.), presents a particular challenge within

this approach. The following part seeks to explore conceptual and practical strategies to address this challenge and thus contribute to the development of another applicable form of Grounded Therapy.

Applied Grounded Therapy: Potentials of Grounded Theory in Psychoanalysis

The core idea behind Grounded Therapy (Simmons, 1994) is to collect data on issues that burden the client and to analyze this data using Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), thereby enabling a scientific reconstruction of unconscious patterns.

Grounded Theory is a comprehensive research methodology that includes specific analytical procedures, such as the constant comparative method, to identify underlying patterns in data through iterative, concept-driven processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Reflexivity, although not emphasized in classic Grounded Theory as a formal criterion, plays a practical role in ensuring that the therapist remains aware of their own preconceptions and minimizes their influence on category development (Finlay, 2002). Similarly, the therapist remains theoretically sensitive to the contextual embeddedness of client narratives, not to interpret them culturally or sociologically in a constructivist sense, but to better understand under which conditions particular patterns emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1996).

The outcomes of the Grounded Therapy process can be incorporated as an additional approach in therapeutic practice, for example, by providing a sound basis for defining individual therapeutic goals or by revealing precise topics for discussion and intervention. Consequently, the Grounded Therapy process promotes the discovery of unconscious dynamics and contributes to a deeper understanding of inner conflicts and their impact on behavior.

One possible form of implementation could involve conducting open, non-directive interviews, in which the therapist invites the client to speak freely about personally significant

experiences. To minimize direct influence on the client's narrative, open-ended questions, such as "Please tell me about a typical day in your life," should be asked, especially at the beginning of the process (Simmons, 2022, p. 259).

Through this process, concepts and issues may begin to emerge from the client's perspective, providing the initial basis for further analysis and meaning-making. This interview would be recorded and could then be transcribed using AI support, since manual transcription within a therapeutic session is often impractical due to the significant time commitment involved. The resulting transcript could subsequently be coded together with the client in a follow-up session, thereby enabling the client to actively contribute their own perspectives and highlight points of relevance to prevent potential misinterpretations.

In a group therapy setting, coding might be carried out collectively under appropriate guidance, similar to procedures in qualitative research projects, to facilitate multiple perspectives on the material and enrich its analysis. Grounded Therapy was applied in anger management groups by actively involving participants in shaping the program. This bottom-up approach, grounded in their expressed concerns, led to a respectful atmosphere, high levels of participation, and long-term commitment. When groups are formed around a shared thematic focus, the method also benefits from the possibility of applying constant comparison between cases, which can enhance theoretical development (Simmons, 2022).

An alternative method for data collection could involve having the client keep a diary. This approach is particularly well-suited to initially identifying and reflecting upon distressing patterns, everyday burdens, or belief systems. However, to capture the spoken and spontaneous expressions that are crucial for analysis, it would be advisable for the client to record a voice message each evening. For instance, AI models capable of converting speech to text in real time

could be utilized. This approach offers several advantages: it is significantly less time-consuming than maintaining a written diary, thereby reducing the client's burden, and it enables an immediate and authentic capture of the client's thoughts in their own words. It is important to note that AI-generated transcripts tend to be smoothed and may miss relevant non-verbal cues, unless manually reviewed and corrected.

The diary method, particularly the use of voice messages to capture spontaneous and authentic self-reflections, bears some resemblance to autoethnographic practices. Both approaches involve the systematic collection of personal data by the individual themselves. However, while autoethnography requires the researcher to engage in a formal analysis of their own experiences within broader cultural, social, or psychological contexts (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), the use of diaries or voice recordings in therapeutic settings serves a different function. Rather than aiming for structured self-analysis, this practice emphasizes the value of unfiltered expression and personal introspection. Clients are encouraged to articulate their experiences in their own language and at their own pace, potentially surfacing implicit thoughts and feelings that may not arise in a structured interview. Another advantage is that spoken memos can be recorded ad hoc immediately after emotionally challenging situations, rather than being discussed retrospectively in a therapy setting days or even weeks later. In this way, although the analytical responsibility lies with the therapist rather than the client, the process still centers the client's lived experience as a meaningful source of insight. The analysis of material obtained from voice recordings and transcripts would follow the core coding procedures of classic Grounded Theory: open coding, selective coding, and theoretical coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

In the initial phase of open coding, the transcript is examined line by line to identify indicators of emerging concepts. These indicators are coded using conceptual labels that go beyond mere description and aim to capture the underlying meaning of the patient's expressions. For instance, if a client describes a lack of emotional exchange with a partner, this passage might be coded with a term such as 'relational withdrawal' or 'distancing behavior'. These codes are not final concepts but serve as starting points for the constant comparison of data segments.

In the subsequent phase of selective coding, the process of constant comparison is applied, where the codes identified during open coding are compared across different parts of the data. This iterative comparison helps to refine and integrate the codes into categories that explain the patterns observed. For instance, a comparison might reveal that 'emotional disengagement' frequently co-occurs with 'fear of rejection' or 'protective detachment', leading to the development of more abstract categories such as 'emotional self-protection'. This step allows for a deeper understanding of the interconnections and relationships between the concepts.

The final phase involves theoretical coding, where the goal is to develop a theoretical framework that explains the relationships between the categories and conceptualizes the core processes that underpin the client's experience. In this stage, the therapist and the client systematically compare categories to determine how they relate to each other and the broader context. The focus is on identifying how the core concepts interact and what underlying mechanisms drive the observed patterns of behavior. For example, it may emerge that 'fear of rejection' drives 'emotional self-protection' behaviors, which in turn contribute to the patient's difficulties with emotional intimacy. Theoretical coding allows for the development of an explanatory theory that brings coherence to the entire data set, integrating patterns, behaviors, and mechanisms into a unified understanding of the client's experiences. This process may

culminate in a micro-substantive theory that is uniquely tailored to the individual client, offering an integrated understanding of how they make sense of their concerns and experiences. This individualized theory can enhance the client's self-reflection by making implicit patterns and meanings more visible, supporting deeper insight and personal growth.

The key categories and patterns emerging from this analysis process (Simmons, 1994) could help the client develop a deeper understanding of their own thought processes and behaviors. The therapist might present the identified categories to the client and encourage reflection on their origins and effects, thereby fostering self-reflection as the client recognizes how certain thought patterns influence their decisions and emotional reactions. For instance, if the category 'fear of disappointment in emotional closeness' plays a central role, the therapist could prompt the client to consider the moments when these negative evaluations are most prominent and how they impact behavior and overall well-being.

Furthermore, the categories and patterns derived from this process could serve as a basis for targeted therapeutic interventions. The therapist might work with the client to modify dysfunctional thought patterns or behaviors, assisting them in developing more realistic and positive self-images or in recognizing and correcting cognitive distortions. In this context, the client could also be encouraged to devise concrete strategies to overcome the problematic patterns identified, perhaps through the use of mindfulness techniques or cognitive restructuring.

Overall, the analytical process informed by Grounded Theory would not only serve to identify central concepts and patterns in the client's data but also provide a robust foundation for therapeutic work. This foundation would enable the client to actively participate in transforming their thought patterns and behaviors, using the insights gained to promote self-reflection and personal development.

To prevent potential re-traumatization, it should be ensured that clients are not confronted with distressing memories during the coding process without appropriate coping strategies being provided. To avoid misinterpretations or one-sided self-analyses, the guidance of the therapist remains essential.

Grounded Therapy differs from narrative therapy and journaling methods in that it employs a systematic coding process that actively involves clients in analyzing their thought and behavioral patterns. While narrative therapy focuses on reconstructing life stories, Grounded Therapy emphasizes the methodological analysis of verbal data to identify unconscious patterns.

Through structured coding, clients can gain deeper insights into recurring cognitive and emotional patterns, allowing for more targeted therapeutic interventions. In Table 1, key concepts of Grounded Theory are compared with their implementation in Grounded Therapy to highlight the distinctions and adaptations made in the therapeutic context.

Table 1
Comparison of Key Concepts in Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and Grounded Therapy (Simmons, 1994)

Grounded Theory Concepts	Grounded Therapy Application
Inductive Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Preconceived ideas are avoided, fostering openness and flexibility.• The client's concerns guide the therapeutic process.• Listening without applying predefined psychological theories.• Therapy begins without standardized tests or diagnostic labels.
Theoretical Sampling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sampling within a case focuses on collecting data on different topics.• Sampling is client-driven, focusing on their concerns.• New data is iteratively selected to deepen understanding of emerging concepts.
Open Coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identifying relevant concepts from the client's statements.• Comparison of statements to develop concepts based on the client's experiences.

Selective Coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflecting on codes in dialogue with the client, without immediate psychological interpretation.• The client acts as a co-analyst, actively determining the relevance and significance of the themes.• Focusing on recurring key issues that shape the therapeutic process.• Narrowing the analysis to central concerns most relevant to the client.• Core categories are refined to explain meaningful patterns in the client's experience.• Central concepts guide ongoing dialogue to support therapeutic insight.
Theoretical Coding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relates core categories to uncover how different aspects of the client's experience influence each other.• Synthesizing patterns to support therapeutic understanding.• Clarifies the structure of the client's narrative by explaining links between central concerns.• May result in a micro-substantive theory tailored to the individual, capturing their unique way of making sense of their issues.
Constant Comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constant comparison refines codes and relationships between concepts throughout the analysis.• Comparisons within the client's data help refine the therapeutic focus.• Cross-case comparisons can inform the therapist's understanding of emerging patterns.
Core Categories	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emerging from the client's narrative, representing the most significant issues in their experience and guiding the therapeutic process.
Theoretical Saturation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Achieved when no new concepts emerge, indicating that the client's core experiences are fully captured in a micro-substantive theory.• Ensuring the theory's relevance by focusing on concepts that directly contribute to understanding the client's narrative.

Advantages and Opportunities of Grounded Therapy

Grounded Therapy offers the potential for enhanced self-reflection that surpasses what traditional talk therapy can achieve by enabling clients to engage in a deeper and more detailed examination of their own thoughts, emotions, and unconscious patterns. Through the systematic

analysis inherent in Grounded Theory, unconscious processes and hard-to-access issues can be brought to awareness. The methodological coding of conversational and diary materials opens up new perspectives and helps to unravel complex internal conflicts. Actively involving clients in this process strengthens the integration of their personal experiences and promotes a more profound engagement with their emotional and psychological challenges.

The coding process can be gradually integrated into therapy to develop a sense of coding, enhance analytical skills, and identify non-obvious patterns.

Recording conversations and utilizing them as data material allows for the capture of thoughts and emotions in a less filtered or selective manner, thereby unveiling unconscious content. Unlike diary entries, where reflections are often tempered by time and deliberation, spontaneous speech under less structured conditions frequently provides unadulterated insights into the client's inner state.

The outcomes of Grounded Therapy can serve as a solid foundation for establishing more precise and individually tailored therapeutic goals. The structured analysis of interviews and diary recordings assists in identifying recurring patterns that can be further explored and addressed in therapy. This approach offers a well-grounded basis for designing therapeutic interventions that directly target the specific needs and challenges of the client.

In group therapy settings, Grounded Therapy can particularly benefit from the diversity of perspectives, as multiple participants contribute to the analysis of the data. This collective process enhances intersubjectivity and fosters a deeper understanding of shared patterns as well as individual differences. The joint exploration of codes and patterns provides additional viewpoints on each participant's experiences and allows for a broader, more nuanced analysis of the material.

Another advantage is that, by engaging in a written coding process (for example, working through texts with pen and paper) a lasting written record is created, allowing clients to repeatedly refer back to the results. This written record also facilitates targeted evaluations, for example, by comparing how similar concepts are addressed over time and assessing progress in the coding process.

Limitations of Grounded Therapy

Despite its innovative approaches, Grounded Therapy presents several challenges and limitations that must be considered both in its methodological application and practical implementation. One of the central hurdles lies in the practical application within a therapeutic setting. The considerable time required for data collection, transcription, coding, and analysis can represent a significant burden that does not always correspond to the therapeutic benefits gained. This is especially relevant in environments constrained by limited resources, where the use of qualitative research approaches may prove challenging. Additionally, a critical issue concerns how to effectively involve clients, who typically lack methodological expertise, in the coding process. There is also a risk that clients may become too closely attached to the material, potentially hindering their openness to unexpected insights.

Another point of tension arises from the cognitive focus of the method. While this approach offers advantages, particularly for clients who are not yet prepared to engage deeply with their emotions, the relatively limited inclusion of emotional processes could be seen as a drawback. Emotions play a central role in the psychotherapeutic context, and it would be desirable to develop strategies that more strongly incorporate this dimension without compromising the method's integrity (Lane et al., 2020).

The application of Grounded Theory in group settings introduces additional challenges. On the one hand, group coding offers the opportunity to integrate diverse perspectives and enrich the analysis, on the other hand, it may be difficult to foster a productive dialogue that balances group cohesion with attention to individual perspectives.

The methodological approach of Grounded Theory allows for an in-depth exploration of central patterns in a client's life, facilitating focused and profound therapeutic work. However, a potential criticism is that the intensive time and resource demands may restrict the exploration of a broader range of issues. At the same time, this focus on core issues could be considered an advantage, as deep, central insights are often transferable to other areas, thereby contributing to the management of similar problems in varied contexts.

Because the method requires a systematic and cognitive approach, it would need to be adapted for children or individuals with cognitive challenges. In such cases, the focus could be on covering relevant topics and discussing them without the need for in-depth analysis of the material. For this target group, it may be worthwhile to explore the potential of applying the Grounded Theory approach to the analysis of observational field notes.

Finally, the ethical dimension must also be taken into account. The use of technologies such as AI for transcription raises concerns regarding client data protection and privacy. Therapists must ensure these methods are employed responsibly, and client protection is maintained at all times. In summary, while Grounded Theory offers innovative perspectives and methodologies, its application requires careful consideration of feasibility, ethics, and therapeutic benefit.

Methodological Considerations for Assessing the Effectiveness of Grounded Therapy

While Grounded Therapy is inherently a patient-centered approach, where each client's core concerns and experiences guide the therapeutic process, it is important to assess its effectiveness in a structured way. The goal is not to reduce Grounded Therapy to a single predefined technique but to evaluate its unique, adaptable nature. This allows for an exploration of how the flexible, client-driven approach of Grounded Therapy can lead to measurable improvements in psychological well-being, such as emotional clarity or self-reflection. A thorough investigation of its effectiveness ensures that the therapy's patient-centered flexibility is preserved, while also providing insight into its impact on clients' therapeutic outcomes. To evaluate the effectiveness of Grounded Therapy, a two-phase research design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches could be implemented. This strategy allows for an in-depth exploration of clients' subjective experiences while simultaneously enabling generalizable statements regarding the method's effectiveness.

In the first phase, an exploratory, qualitative approach could be adopted, utilizing Grounded Theory to identify the central mechanisms of action within the therapy and to develop a theoretical model. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews could be conducted with approximately 15–20 clients undergoing Grounded Therapy, as well as 5–8 therapists. These interviews would aim to capture perceived changes, challenges, acceptance, and facilitating factors from the clients' perspectives. The data collected would then be analyzed using the principles of Grounded Theory (open, selective and theoretical coding) to extract specific dimensions of therapeutic impact, such as 'emotional clarity', 'self-reflection', or 'improvement in coping strategies.' Based on these insights, appropriate measurement instruments for the

quantitative phase can be developed or existing scales, for example, those used to assess depressive symptoms (e.g., the Beck Depression Inventory-II, BDI-II), can be adapted.

In the second phase, a randomized controlled trial could be conducted to compare the effectiveness of Grounded Therapy with that of an established method, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). The sample would consist of approximately 200 clients with similar diagnostic profiles (e.g., anxiety disorders or depression), who would be randomly allocated to two groups. Both groups would participate in a structured therapy program over a period of twelve weeks with weekly sessions, with the intervention group receiving Grounded Therapy and the control group undergoing CBT.

The effectiveness of the therapies would be assessed using standardized questionnaires that measure both psychological symptoms and the capacity for self-reflection. For instance, the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) could be employed to gauge the severity of depressive symptoms (Beck et al., 1996), and the Self-Reflection and Insight Scale (SRIS) could be used to assess self-reflection and insight (Grant et al., 2002). Measurements would be taken at baseline, immediately after the completion of therapy, and at follow-up intervals of six and twelve months to analyze the sustainability of effects. Statistical techniques such as ANCOVA could be applied to evaluate group differences and the influence of potential covariates (e.g., age, gender, symptom severity) (Kirchmann & Steyer, 2012).

To scientifically establish Grounded Therapy and ensure comparability, it is essential to define a clear framework for its practical implementation before the study begins. One possible approach would involve clients generating transcribed diary entries over a two-week period, which are then jointly analyzed with the therapist. During these sessions, patterns, emotional

triggers, and positive resources could be identified. A standardized protocol for administering the therapy would be necessary to ensure consistent conditions for all participants.

This research design provides a robust foundation for systematically investigating both the underlying mechanisms and the overall effectiveness of Grounded Therapy, thereby enabling scientifically substantiated conclusions regarding its applicability and efficacy.

However, it is important to note that quantifying the effectiveness of Grounded Therapy through traditional metrics may not fully capture its essence as a therapeutic stance that permeates the entire process. Grounded Therapy is not just a set of techniques, but an approach that encourages ongoing reflection, collaboration, and adaptation to each client's needs. While empirical studies are valuable in establishing its efficacy, the true benefit of Grounded Therapy may lie in its flexibility and client-centered approach, which cannot always be fully captured by standardized outcome measures alone. Therefore, further research might explore how Grounded Therapy can be integrated into clinical practice as a holistic therapeutic attitude, rather than being confined to a singular method.

Discussion

The further development of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) within the context of psychotherapeutic practice (Simmons, 1994) offers a promising perspective, particularly when engaged in dialogue with established psychotherapeutic models. By addressing unconscious patterns through qualitative analysis, this method opens new dimensions for psychotherapy, carrying far-reaching implications for both theory and practice.

Classic Grounded Theory and the Potential for Integrating Constructivist Approaches

In therapeutic settings, the application of classic Grounded Theory (Glaser, 2014) offers distinct advantages due to its structured approach to data analysis, which emphasizes abstraction

and the development of theoretical categories grounded in empirical data. By focusing on the relationships between key concepts and the processes underlying client experiences, classic Grounded Theory facilitates a theory-driven understanding of therapeutic dynamics. The abstraction inherent in classic Grounded Theory allows therapists to move beyond surface-level descriptions of emotional or behavioral patterns, instead identifying the deeper, often unspoken processes that shape a client's experiences.

Classic Grounded Theory's emphasis on constant comparison and theoretical sampling aligns well with the iterative nature of therapeutic work. As therapists collect and analyze client narratives, these evolving categories of understanding can be refined and expanded, helping both the client and therapist adapt the therapy process to address emerging needs. Theoretically, this approach encourages an exploration of client issues from a detached, analytical perspective, which contrasts with the more interpretative stance found in some other methods, where subjective engagement with the data may lead to different understandings of the same issue.

While the strengths of classic Grounded Theory in a therapeutic setting are clear, certain elements of the constructivist approach to Grounded Theory may also be relevant, particularly when considering the role of the therapist's interpretations in shaping the therapeutic relationship. Constructivist Grounded Theory, as proposed by Charmaz (2006), emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between the therapist and client, highlighting the subjective nature of data interpretation. This perspective may offer valuable insights into the way therapists influence and shape clients' narratives, making it a potential point of integration for future applications of Grounded Theory. However, it remains crucial to maintain the foundational principles of classic Grounded Theory, ensuring that the primary focus remains on uncovering concepts grounded in

the client's own experiences, rather than blending these with the therapist's subjective interpretation too strongly.

Connection to Existing Psychotherapeutic Models

The method presented in this work is closely related to established psychotherapeutic approaches, most notably cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT primarily focuses on addressing conscious cognitive patterns and behaviors to identify and modify dysfunctional thought processes (Beck, 2011). However, the extension provided by Grounded Therapy enables the identification and processing of unconscious patterns and deeply ingrained internal processes, which in classical CBT are only indirectly or tangentially addressed. In this sense, the method can be seen as a complement to CBT, as it supports the process of self-awareness and change through a more profound engagement with the unconscious layers of the psyche.

Comparable to this are humanistic approaches, particularly person-centered therapy as formulated by Rogers (1961), which emphasizes the enhancement of self-experience and the client's subjective perspective. While person-centered therapy focuses strongly on personal experience and self-perception, Grounded Therapy offers a more structured approach that systematically uncovers patterns. This additional layer of structure could lead to a more nuanced treatment of problem areas without undermining the client's autonomy in therapy. Thus, the method's structured and methodological approach can be regarded as a valuable extension to humanistic therapy, one that further refines the therapeutic process while still valuing the client's subjective experience.

Another theoretical reference point is psychoanalytic theory, which is concerned with unconscious processes and the revelation of repressed content (Mitchell & Black, 1995). The joint coding of conversations and diary entries employed in this method offers a modern and

participatory approach that implements the psychoanalytic goal of bringing unconscious content to light in a more collaborative and open manner. In contrast to traditional psychoanalytic practice, which is characterized by an asymmetrical relationship between therapist and client, this method has the potential to foster a more democratic relationship, in which the client is actively involved in the process.

Strengthening the Therapeutic Alliance

A central feature of the presented method is the joint coding of conversations and diary entries, which could significantly enhance the therapeutic alliance (Simmons, 1994), that is, the trust-based collaboration between therapist and client in psychotherapy (Howard, Berry, & Haddock, 2021). By introducing joint coding, the client is empowered to take an active role as a co-creator of the therapeutic process. This shift may not only elevate the therapeutic relationship to a more collaborative level but also promote the client's trust and self-efficacy. The client transitions from being a passive recipient to an active contributor, whose perspectives and perceptions are integrated on an equal footing into the therapy process. Nevertheless, careful guidance and support from the therapist remain essential to ensure that the client receives the necessary orientation and assistance throughout the coding process.

Practical Feasibility and Integration of AI

An innovative aspect of Grounded Therapy lies in the potential integration of AI-supported analytical tools. For instance, AI can facilitate the speech-to-text conversion of voice messages and interviews, enabling a more efficient and less time-consuming data collection process. At the current stage of development, AI tools can be pragmatically integrated into the Grounded Therapy process to support various practical aspects. For instance, AI can assist with the transcription of recorded conversations, the organization of large amounts of qualitative data,

and the identification of recurring descriptive elements within the material. While the conceptual steps of analysis remain a human task, these supportive functions can help facilitate the overall research process by saving time and enhancing data accessibility. Several practical considerations must be addressed for the successful implementation of Grounded Therapy in psychotherapeutic practice. A critical factor is the availability of technological resources. The method relies on modern technologies such as recording devices and AI-powered transcription tools, which may present challenges in terms of accessibility and cost. Additionally, the training of therapists is paramount. To apply the method effectively, therapists must not only be well-versed in Grounded Theory but also proficient in the use of the relevant technologies. Continuing education courses or workshops could play a crucial role in ensuring that therapists integrate the method correctly and effectively into their practice.

Conclusion and Outlook

Grounded Therapy presents significant potential for expanding psychotherapeutic practice, particularly through its systematic approach to reconstructing unconscious patterns. However, its practical implementation requires careful consideration of methodological requirements and therapeutic objectives. In this article, various approaches to data collection and analysis in the context of Grounded Theory have been explored. Future research could focus on optimizing the method, for example, by integrating emotional components, enhancing AI-supported analytical tools, or developing guidelines for its application in practice. Additionally, an empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of Grounded Therapy in various contexts would be necessary to further substantiate its therapeutic relevance. Overall, Grounded Therapy represents a promising intersection between qualitative research and psychotherapeutic practice, offering

the potential for deeper insights into the dynamics of human experience and thereby contributing to the further development of psychotherapeutic methodology.

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