




(Re)discovering the grounded theory for research in nursing: reflections on the relativist strand

(Re)Descobrimos a teoria fundamentada para a pesquisa em enfermagem: reflexões sobre a vertente relativista

(Re)Descubriendo la teoría fundamentada para la investigación en enfermería: reflexiones sobre la corriente relativista

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ABSTRACT

Objective: to describe and critically analyze the relativistic aspect of Grounded Theory (GT), also addressing how to use this methodological framework in qualitative research in Nursing. **Content:** this reflective, theoretical study was organized into three topics: first, the evolution of GT and the legacy of Strauss; then, the methodological characteristics of the relativistic approach; and, finally, the contributions of relativist GT to Brazilian Nursing research. **Final considerations:** this framework is appropriate for nursing studies, as it makes it possible to generate explanatory models based on nursing in practice, and provides input for health personnel to reflect on their own practice, in order to optimize the quality of care.

Descriptors: Nursing Research; Methods; Grounded Theory; Qualitative research.

RESUMO

Objetivo: descrever e analisar criticamente a vertente relativista da Teoria fundamentada nos dados (TFD), incluindo uma abordagem de como utilizar este referencial metodológico nas pesquisas qualitativas em enfermagem. **Conteúdo:** estudo teórico reflexivo organizado em três tópicos. Primeiramente apresenta a evolução da TFD e o legado straussiano; na sequência as características metodológicas da vertente relativista e por fim, as contribuições da TFD relativista para as pesquisas em enfermagem brasileira. **Considerações finais:** trata-se de um referencial apropriado para estudos na enfermagem, por possibilitar a geração de modelos explicativos, a partir da prática de enfermagem, e por fornecer subsídios para os profissionais de saúde refletirem sobre o seu fazer com vistas a otimizar a qualidade do cuidado.

Descritores: Pesquisa em Enfermagem; Métodos; Teoria fundamentada; Pesquisa Qualitativa.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: describir y analizar críticamente el aspecto relativista de la Teoría fundamentada en los datos (TFD), incluyendo un enfoque sobre cómo utilizar ese marco metodológico en las investigaciones cualitativas en enfermería. **Contenido:** estudio teórico reflexivo organizado en tres temas. Primero, presenta la evolución de la TDF y el legado straussiano; luego, las características metodológicas de la corriente relativista y, finalmente, las contribuciones de la TDF relativista a las investigaciones en enfermería brasileña. **Consideraciones finales:** se trata de un marco apropiado para los estudios de enfermería, ya que permite la generación de modelos explicativos, basados en la práctica de enfermería, y que proporciona subsidios para que los profesionales de la salud reflexionen sobre su propia práctica, con el fin de optimizar la calidad del cuidado.

Descriptores: Investigación en Enfermería; Métodos; Teoría fundamentada; Investigación cualitativa.

INTRODUCTION

The Grounded Theory (GT) is a methodological framework that makes it possible to generate explanations, based on understanding the experiences and meanings that social actors undergo in a given scenario, investigating the interactions, behaviors, perceptions and thoughts of the individual in relation to a given object¹. Its applicability in different knowledge areas, especially in health sciences and education levels, is due to its wide national and international dissemination^{2,3}.

In the Brazilian Nursing context, its increasing use as a qualitative research method has contributed to the expansion of scientific production and to the construction of knowledge about little explored or still unexplored phenomena, arising from the daily routine of professional practices, be them in care, management, education or training⁴.

Despite the widespread use of the GT in Nursing research, it can be seen that the method has been used in a very heterogeneous way, both in terms of formal structure and in the analytical processes used by researchers. The national scientific literature has discussed conceptual aspects and the contributions of the method to advances in Nursing

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research^{5,6}, as well as presenting the characteristics of the different methodological currents^{5,7,8}. However, with regard to the approach used in the studies, the research reports have presented a variety of approaches that deserve to be more widely discussed.

The relativist strand, also called Straussian or subjectivist, is the GT strand most frequently used to support the discussion and development of research studies in Nursing⁹. Authors Strauss and Corbin are its main representatives, their works describe GT operationalization, and its last publication in 2015, until the present moment, has not been translated into Portuguese. Given the widespread use of this strand, the importance of critically analyzing its application arises to provide subsidies for interested researchers and contribute to the production of knowledge about this framework.

Thus, the objective of this study was to describe and critically analyze the relativist strand of the GT, including an approach on how to use this methodological framework in qualitative research studies in Nursing.

To conduct this reflection, it was decided to organize the text didactically into three topics: Evolution of the GT and the Straussian legacy; Methodological characteristics of the relativist approach; and Contributions of the GT in Nursing research studies.

CONTENT

Evolution of the Grounded Theory and the Straussian legacy

The GT was initially developed in the 1960s by two sociologists, Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, who had different philosophical and research traditions. By working together, they developed a study on the awareness of dying in hospital contexts, considered innovative at the time, as the authors gave their data a systematic analytical treatment producing theoretical analyses on the social organization and time disposition of death¹⁰.

Despite the success obtained with this and another work, over time, divergences began to emerge between both creators of the method in relation to the methodological procedures employed. Glaser chose to maintain the classic structure of the method, advocating objective empiricism to conduct the research studies, while Strauss conducted the GT for validation criteria, incorporating new analysis instruments, such as interpretative description of the data, although without neglecting the appreciation of the subjective social meanings that emerge from human action, and which reveal its pragmatic philosophical tradition⁵.

In 1990, after breaking up with Glaser and in partnership with Juliet Corbin, Strauss published the book entitled *"Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing the Grounded Theory"*. Here, they advocated the idea that generation of a theory occurs from the collaborative relationship between researchers and study participants, a fact that diverges from the primary conception of the method^{5,10}. It was in this context that Kathy Charmaz, one of Glaser's students, introduced her version of the method and proposed the constructivist interpretation in 2000^{10,11}.

It is also important to report that the second version of the work by Strauss and Corbin, entitled *"Qualitative Research: Techniques and procedures for Development the Grounded Theory"*, was published in 2008, after Strauss' death. The third version improved by Corbin was released in 2015, receiving the title of *"Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing the Grounded Theory"*.

In view of this, in evolution of the method, three main GT schools were developed, namely: the classical or Glaserian school; the relativist or Straussian school; and the Constructivist or Charmazian school. Each of these strands presents specificities that enable different modes of operation, based on their representatives' epistemological concepts and paradigms⁵.

As similarities between the schools, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, simultaneity between data collection and analysis, theoretical sensitivity, the substantive theory, elaboration of concepts and use of memos and diagrams stand out^{8,12}. With regard to the main differences, there are the epistemological paradigm, the ontological position, the use of literature, operationalization of data analysis and development of the theory, as shown in Figure 1.

Characteristics	Aspects of the Grounded Theory		
	Classic	Straussian	Constructivist
Epistemological paradigm	Positivism	Post-positivism and Symbolic Interactionism	Constructivism and Symbolic Interactionism
Ontological position	Critical realism	Pragmatic relativism	Relativism of multiple social realities
Use of literature	Only at the end	In all stages	In all stages and compiled at the end
Conducting the research and developing the theory	Emphasis on data emergence, through the induction process and the researcher's creativity	Use of the paradigmatic model	Co-construction and reconstruction of data towards the theory
Coding stages	1. Substantive 1.1 Open 1.2 Selective 2. Theoretical	1. Open 2. Axial 3. Integration	1. Initial 2. Focused

FIGURE 1: Differentiating features of the GT, according to the methodological strands. Teresina, PI, Brazil, 2022. Source: Adapted by the authors^{8,13}.

Methodological characteristics of the relativist approach

A feature that differentiates the GT from other qualitative research designs is the use of comparative analysis. This consists of a process in which the data are collected and constantly compared to each other, with the objective of determining differences and similarities, reducing data to concepts in order to develop them into properties and dimensions, and to differentiate one concept from another, providing more rigorous data¹⁴. This process allows generating provisional hypotheses that are constantly compared to new data and subsequently confirmed throughout the course of the research, making the theoretical explanation increasingly dense^{2,15}.

The collection technique in this area recommends using unstructured interviews, also called open, intensive or in-depth interviews, to allow the participants to speak freely about the topic. In addition to that, if necessary, the researcher is allowed to ask new questions in search of deepening the reflections and understanding of the studied phenomenon¹⁶. Other data collection techniques can also be used, such as observation, focus groups, group interviews and analysis of photographs, pictures or documents.

Once the data collection technique has been established, the researcher must define the participants of the first sample group, listing participants who are experiencing the social situation under study or data sources considered important. As the first data are analyzed, the next participants or data source will be selected according to the need to fill in gaps or for theoretical deepening¹⁷.

Theoretical sampling is gradually built up until the moment when theoretical saturation occurs, as this is what determines the end of data collection. Saturation occurs when the concepts identified are well developed in their several properties and dimensions under different conditions.

Data analysis is carried out considering all three interdependent stages proposed in the new edition of Strauss and Corbin's work: open coding, axial coding, and integration¹⁴. Despite being presented in stages, the analysis process in the GT does not occur in a linear, constant and orderly way since, at in some moments, the researcher can return to the data again, go back in some passages and, later, advance one step at a time to a different and higher level¹⁰.

In open coding, the first analysis stage, the data are separated into distinct parts, being rigorously examined and compared in search for similarities and differences. In this stage, the data are labeled, that is, the facts are divided into different ideas, incidents, events and acts, and then are given a name that represents them, which can be taken from the words of the informants, in this case called *in vivo* code¹.

In axial coding, after identifying the concepts that represent the interpretation of the meaning expressed in the words or actions of the participants (raw data) identified in the previous stage, they are grouped into categories, which are higher-level concepts, that is, more abstract terms than denote the main topic that a group of entry-level concepts is presenting¹⁴.

Once the category is identified, the analyst must begin to develop it in terms of specific properties and dimensions. The properties refer to the general or specific characteristics or attributes of a concept, and the dimensions represent the variations within the properties, being responsible for the specificity and scope of the concepts¹⁴. In this stage, the

categories are related to the subcategories. The latter better specify a category by denoting information such as when, where, why and how a phenomenon tends to happen.

The last stage of the coding proposed in this area is integration, previously called selective. The name change is justified by the adaptation to the process carried out, which develops increasingly from the beginning of the analytical process until all categories are saturated, sustaining the phenomenon¹⁶.

In the integration stage, the categories are organized around a central concept called "central category". This is the category among the others that has the greatest explanatory power and ability to connect to the rest to assemble a theoretical explanation of why and how something happened¹⁴. In synthesis, it is understood that the proposal of a central category is the result of the researcher's capacity for abstraction, by combining theoretical sensitivity with the inductive-deductive process, to generate the theory that explains the phenomenon under study.

As the associations between categories can be very subtle and implicit, it is important to use an analytical tool called paradigmatic model, which consists of a set of questions applied to the data to help researchers separate concepts and establish possible links between them, in addition to helping to establish the relationships between the categories and the identification of the research phenomenon or central category. The most current paradigmatic model consists of three components: conditions, actions/interactions and consequences^{8,14}.

The conditions are the reasons and explanations given by the participants as to why they respond, how they respond to events and problematic situations through actions and interactions, and why things happen. The actions and interactions correspond to the meanings attributed by people to the events and problematic situations that occurred; while the consequences component presents the anticipated or current outcomes that resulted from the actions and interactions¹⁴.

The theory generated from the data is of the substantive type because it refers to a proposal that studies a phenomenon, providing knowledge about a problem delimited to a specific context. This theory must be credible, have consistency and coherence, present arguments and support results, as well as explain the phenomenon and characteristics in terms of properties and dimensions¹⁷.

The method proposes memos and diagrams as strategies to assist the researcher in the data analysis process. The first ones are researcher notes initially expressing ideas about the codes and their relationships and, later, insights about categories or relationships between them⁴. In turn, the diagrams are graphic representations of the relationships between the concepts and categories outlined and, together with the subcategories, favor the comparison process, contributing to the design of different abstraction levels that will assist in density of the theory^{14,18}.

Once theorizing is finished, it is possible to validate the theory. Validation makes it possible to analyze whether the theoretical model, theoretical matrix or constructed theory, is representative of the investigated reality, in addition to discussing its applicability to other time and space contexts^{5,19}. Thus, it is understood that the theoretical framework developed must be able to explain most of the participants' reports, which were methodically analyzed and raised to a conceptual level.

Considering the high amount of data that may arise during the GT analysis process, the researcher may choose to use software for analysis. However, as the GT is a method that requires theoretical sensitivity from the researcher to distinguish and attribute meaning to the data, recognizing variations and differences in conceptual terms throughout the coding stage, this tool should be used as a support, to avoid distancing the researcher from the data throughout the analytical process and hinder understanding of the phenomenon.

Contributions of relativistic GT in Nursing research

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of qualitative research studies in the field of health sciences, and Nursing has also followed this trend. In Nursing, studies using this approach have enabled the understanding of human beings in their complexity and depth, as well as the nuances inherent to the health care process. To this end, researchers have sought to escape more traditional approaches focusing on the description of phenomena and have turned to understanding their essence, as well as to the production of critical and emancipatory knowledge committed to social transformation²⁰. It is in this context that the GT has been increasingly used in Nursing research studies.

As a qualitative method, the GT goes beyond the ability to operationalize a set of procedures and techniques, being related to the development of theoretical explanations about human behavior¹¹. It has established itself as a relevant method for the Nursing field in recent decades, as it allows creating theory from practice⁷.

Despite its popularization, the analysis of the Brazilian academic production has shown that the research studies carried out have taken place more frequently in academic PhD and Master's courses⁹. However, in studies involving undergraduate Nursing students, either scientific initiation or Course Completion Papers (CCPs), this growth is not empirically verified. This fact is perhaps related to the challenges for knowledge production using this framework, which involves mastering the specifics of the method that is achieved with experience, and the exhaustive coding process, which demands time to carry out the study.

The relativist approach has been used more frequently in Nursing studies. This strand is the most suitable option for researchers who are new to the method, as it is more didactic and systematic in relation to the others¹². Furthermore, adoption of the paradigmatic model in the axial stage ends up helping researchers who do not yet have experience with the framework in the theoretical abstraction necessary for interpreting the data and elaborating the theoretical matrix⁸.

Although the relativistic GT procedures are presented in a systematic and structured way, the researchers' lack of knowledge or of clarity regarding the path and techniques to develop their studies can interfere with knowledge production. Therefore, it becomes necessary that they master the precepts that confer quality and methodological rigor to their studies, such as similarities and differences of this aspect in relation to the others. In addition to that, the choice for the GT relativist approach requires researchers to have characteristics and skills such as theoretical sensitivity and the ability to use deductive and inductive processes to assign concepts at a high abstraction level, in addition to creativity, determination and dedication.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The data presented in this theoretical reflection study help to understand the GT guiding characteristics that are common to all three methodological approaches and, mainly, the specificities of the relativistic approach, and will help beginner and experienced researchers to (re)discover the GT and to use the relativistic approach in conducting future developed research studies.

In the national context, there is still a need for more studies in Nursing using the relativist approach. The GT is a method that offers the possibility of bringing the researcher closer to the subjective dimensions of experiences, which are undervalued in studies based on the positivist model, and allows understanding little explored phenomena. It is hoped that this article will provide an accessible and usable guide to producing theoretical and qualitative outcomes in healthcare settings, which can help propagate the GT in Nursing research studies and deepen understanding of specific phenomena in different population segments.

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