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HOW SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM INFORMS GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT

Qualitative health research requires methodological approaches capable of explaining how meanings, actions and social processes are constructed within particular contexts. Although the relationship between Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory is well established, how symbolic interactionist assumptions inform concrete analytical decisions during category development is less often made explicit. This theoretical-conceptual article addresses this practice-level gap within Corbin and Strauss' Grounded Theory approach. Its aim is to make visible how epistemological assumptions informed the interpretive transition from descriptive coding to conceptual development. Selected analytical episodes from a previously completed study involving parents of children with cancer are used as an illustrative methodological context rather than to report the study's findings. The article reconstructs the progression from interview excerpts and provisional open codes to constant comparison, analytical memo writing, axial coding and emerging subcategories. Three analytical movements are examined: interpreting different actions through a shared symbolic function, understanding apparently contradictory meanings as part of the same evolving process, and conceptualising different remembrance practices through a shared relational function. These episodes show that category development involved more than grouping similar behaviours; it required examining how participants defined situations, negotiated meanings and sustained relationships. Reflexivity, theoretical sensitivity, memo writing and diagramming supported the questioning of provisional interpretations, the examination of relationships among subcategories and their integration into substantive theory. By making these analytical transitions visible, the article offers a pedagogical and practice-oriented account of how epistemological assumptions, reflexivity and Grounded Theory procedures can be integrated coherently. This reconstruction may support researchers in maintaining methodological coherence and transparency when developing substantive theory in qualitative health and nursing research.

Keywords

Symbolic interactionism; Grounded theory; Qualitative data analysis; Nursing research.

1. Introduction

Childhood cancer, although rare, has substantial clinical, emotional and social consequences for children and their families, disrupting routines, roles and support networks (Enskär et al., 2020; Lewandowska, 2021; Öhman et al., 2021; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Understanding parental responses therefore requires attention to the meanings attributed to actions, interactions and relationships.

Grounded Theory (GT) is suited to examining dynamic social processes and developing conceptual explanations grounded in participants' experiences (Birks & Mills, 2023; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Since its formulation by Glaser and Strauss (1967), GT has evolved into traditions with distinct epistemological and analytical emphases (Birks & Mills, 2023; Charmaz, 2014; Rieger, 2019). The study informing this article adopted Corbin and Strauss' (2015) approach because its relational and process-oriented framework matched the aim of explaining how parents interpreted changing situations and adjusted their actions throughout their child's cancer trajectory. Its open and axial coding framework supported relational analysis, while constant comparison, memo writing and diagramming enabled progressive conceptual integration (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Although Glaserian and constructivist approaches offer legitimate alternatives, Corbin and Strauss' framework provided the closest fit with the research question and analytical procedures used; the choice therefore reflected methodological coherence rather than hierarchy among GT traditions (Birks & Mills, 2023; Charmaz, 2014; Rieger, 2019).

Within this approach, Symbolic Interactionism (SI) provides an interpretive foundation for examining how meanings are constructed and modified through interaction (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Existing scholarship has examined the epistemological and methodological relationship between SI and GT and illustrated its implications for research design and analysis (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Hewitt et al., 2022; Klunklin & Greenwood, 2006; Milliken & Schreiber, 2012; Newman, 2008). However, less attention has been given to how SI informs specific analytical comparisons, interpretive shifts, memo-based reasoning and category development (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Milliken & Schreiber, 2012; Newman, 2008). When these links remain implicit, GT risks being applied as a set of analytical techniques detached from its interpretive foundations, reducing transparency in how categories and theoretical explanations are developed.

This article addresses this practice-level gap by offering a pedagogical reconstruction of selected analytical pathways from a completed study with parents of children with cancer, used as an illustrative methodological context.

2. Symbolic Interactionism as an Interpretive and Epistemological Foundation for Grounded Theory

SI understands human action as interpretive and socially situated.

Drawing on Mead, Blumer (1969) proposed that individuals act according to the meanings things hold for them, that meanings arise through interaction, and that they are interpreted and modified as situations change. “Things” include objects, people, relationships, events and social situations (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2010). Meanings are therefore neither fixed nor purely individual but constructed and renegotiated within social contexts.

As an interpretive and epistemological foundation for GT, SI directs analysis beyond behavioural description towards how participants define situations, negotiate meanings and relationships, and modify action over time (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Hewitt et al., 2022; Milliken & Schreiber, 2012; Newman, 2008). Within Corbin and Strauss’ approach, social reality is consequently understood as processual, situated and interpreted rather than fixed. Participants’ accounts are treated as expressions of how situations were understood and acted upon within particular relational contexts, rather than as transparent representations of an objective reality (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Categories are conceptual interpretations progressively developed through iterative engagement with the data. The researcher moves between empirical material and emerging concepts, comparing incidents, questioning provisional interpretations and increasing abstraction. Constant comparison examines similarities, differences and variations in meaning; memos document interpretations, tensions and analytical shifts; and diagrams clarify relationships among codes, subcategories and broader processes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Together, these procedures strengthen theoretical sensitivity and make category development more visible.

The researcher is actively involved in conceptual development. Reflexivity supports the identification of assumptions, consideration of alternatives and assessment of whether emerging concepts remain grounded in participants’ meanings. Substantive theory is therefore understood as an integrated explanation of a situated social process rather than a universal account (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this article, these assumptions informed the interpretation of shared symbolic functions, coexisting meanings and relational continuity.

3. Overview of the Illustrative Study

The examples derive from a previously completed study using Corbin and Strauss’ (2015) GT approach. The study aimed to develop a substantive nursing theory explaining the process experienced by parents throughout their child’s cancer trajectory.

It was conducted in a specialised paediatric oncology unit at a Portuguese reference centre. Theoretical sampling involved 16 parents at different stages of the illness trajectory and continued until theoretical saturation. Data were generated through 14 open interviews; 12 interviews were conducted individually, and two were conducted jointly with both parents from the same family.

Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently through constant comparison. Open, axial and selective coding were supported by analytical and reflexive memos and diagramming (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

NVivo assisted data organisation and retrieval but did not replace interpretive analysis. Rigour was supported through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The episodes were purposively selected to illustrate transitions from initial coding to subcategory development. They are presented not as a summary of findings, but as methodological reconstructions of how SI informed analytical decisions.

4. Analytical Reasoning Informed by Symbolic Interactionism

The following episodes illustrate how SI informed category development. Rather than reporting the original findings, they reconstruct three movements towards conceptual abstraction: interpreting different actions through a shared symbolic function, recognising contradictory meanings within the same process, and understanding different remembrance practices through a shared relational function. The pathways are simplified methodological reconstructions based on selected provisional codes and condensed, translated analytical memos. The subcategories developed through continued comparison with related incidents across the wider dataset. Participants are identified using consistent anonymous codes, with M indicating mother and P indicating father, followed by a sequential number. These codes are used to distinguish excerpts while preserving participant confidentiality.

4.1 Analytical Episode 1: Interpreting Different Actions Through a Shared Symbolic Function

The first analytical challenge concerned parents' different responses to uncertainty surrounding their child's illness. Some searched intensively for scientific information, whereas others deliberately limited information or organised detailed records.

One father described his search for scientific knowledge:

"Then I started researching, reading theses about leukaemia, protein markers and enzymes..."

(P4)

During open coding, one provisional code assigned to this excerpt was *intensive search for scientific information*. Another participant reflected on the limits of this strategy:

“It gave me the false and stupid idea of control. It is absolutely false because we have no control at all.”

(M3)

One provisional code assigned to this excerpt was *perceived illusory control*. In contrast, another parent stated:

“I’m not a doctor or a nurse... if I searched for information, I would probably become even more confused. My role was simply to be a mother.”

(M7)

This excerpt was provisionally coded as deliberate avoidance of information seeking.

At a descriptive level, these codes appeared to represent different behavioural patterns. Comparison with related incidents across the dataset, however, redirected the analysis towards the meanings and functions of the actions. Seeking, organising and limiting information were interpreted as different ways of regulating uncertainty while preserving an active parental role. The focus therefore shifted from distinguishing behaviours to examining what they enabled parents to accomplish within an unpredictable situation.

- **Condensed analytical memo:**

Seeking, organising and limiting information were different actions performing a shared symbolic function: regulating uncertainty while preserving an active parental role. The analytical focus should therefore move from information-seeking behaviour to what these actions enabled parents to accomplish within an uncontrollable situation.

Through axial coding and continued comparison with the wider dataset, these and related initial codes contributed to the development of the subcategory *Managing unpredictability*, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical progression leading to the development of the subcategory *Managing unpredictability*

Analytical stage	Development
Initial open coding	intensive search for scientific information; perceived illusory control; deliberate avoidance of information seeking
Axial coding and constant comparison	Different actions were interpreted as performing a shared symbolic function
Analytical memo	Parents regulated uncertainty through symbolic strategies that preserved an active parental role
Emerging subcategory	<i>Managing unpredictability</i>

4.2 Analytical Episode 2: Interpreting Contradictory Meanings Within the Same Social Process

A second analytical challenge emerged in parents' descriptions of prognosis and the possibility of death. Some acknowledged a poor prognosis while continuing to express hope.

One mother recalled:

"The doctor immediately told us that she had very little chance of surviving..."

(M7)

One provisional code assigned to this excerpt was *poor prognosis communicated*. In the same interview, she stated:

"But we always think that zero can become one..."

(M7)

This excerpt was provisionally coded as *hope despite poor prognosis*. Another mother, reflecting on her daughter's death, explained:

"When she died, I no longer believed... I was expecting it, but I wasn't expecting it."

(M8)

One provisional code assigned to this excerpt was *hope-acceptance ambivalence*.

Considered separately, these codes could suggest mutually exclusive responses. Constant comparison within and across interviews challenged this interpretation. Recognition of the possibility of death did not necessarily replace hope; both meanings could coexist and be reinterpreted as the child's condition changed. The analytical question therefore shifted from determining whether parents had moved from hope to acceptance to examining how they negotiated both meanings within the same unfolding experience.

- **Condensed analytical memo:**

Hope and acceptance should not be interpreted as sequential or mutually exclusive responses.

They could coexist and be redefined as circumstances changed. The analytical focus should therefore be on how parents negotiated these apparently contradictory meanings while confronting the possibility of losing their child.

Through axial coding and continued comparison with the wider dataset, these and related initial codes contributed to the development of the subcategory *Recognising the proximity of death: between hope and acceptance*, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Analytical progression leading to the development of the subcategory *Recognising the proximity of death: between hope and acceptance*

Analytical stage	Development
Initial open coding	poor prognosis communicated; hope despite poor prognosis; hope–acceptance ambivalence
Axial coding and constant comparison	Apparently contradictory meanings were interpreted as coexisting within the same unfolding process
Analytical memo	Hope and acceptance were continuously negotiated rather than experienced as sequential stages
Emerging subcategory	<i>Recognising the proximity of death: between hope and acceptance</i>

4.3 Analytical Episode 3: Interpreting Different Symbolic Practices as Sustaining the Parent–Child Bond

The third analytical challenge concerned how parents maintained the presence of their child following death. Some spoke frequently about the child, others shared photographs with siblings, whereas others avoided emotionally intense reminders.

One father stated:

“I just want to talk about her... we talk about her everywhere!”
(P6)

One provisional code assigned to this excerpt was *constant evocation of the child’s memory*. Another father explained:

“I show them photographs and talk about her.”
(P5)

This excerpt was provisionally coded as *sharing memories with siblings*. The same participant also stated:

“Videos I can’t watch, and I don’t even try.”
(P5)

One provisional code assigned to this excerpt was *avoiding emotionally intense reminders*.

At a descriptive level, these codes could have been interpreted as different ways of coping with bereavement, particularly as a contrast between remembering and avoiding reminders. Comparison with related incidents across the dataset, however, indicated that avoiding videos did not necessarily signify withdrawal from the relationship with the child. The analysis therefore moved beyond the form of each practice towards its relational meaning. Talking about the child, sharing photographs and avoiding overwhelming reminders were interpreted as different symbolic practices through which parents sustained the bond while regulating emotional exposure.

- **Condensed analytical memo:**

The parent–child bond was not sustained through a single form of remembrance. Talking about the child, sharing photographs and avoiding overwhelming reminders were interpreted as different symbolic practices that performed a shared relational function while regulating emotional proximity.

Through axial coding and continued comparison with the wider dataset, these and related initial codes contributed to the development of the subcategory *Continuity of the parent–child bond*, as summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Analytical progression leading to the development of the subcategory *Continuity of the parent–child bond*

Analytical stage	Development
Initial open coding	constant evocation of the child's memory; sharing memories with siblings; avoiding emotionally intense reminders
Axial coding and constant comparison	Different remembrance practices were interpreted as performing a shared relational function
Analytical memo	Parents preserved the bond through different symbolic practices
Emerging subcategory	<i>Continuity of the parent–child bond</i>

Taken together, these episodes show that category development involved more than grouping similar behaviours. SI directed attention towards how participants defined situations, negotiated changing meanings and sustained relationships. Constant comparison and memo writing enabled provisional codes to be questioned, related to other incidents and progressively integrated into more abstract subcategories organised around symbolic and relational functions.

5. Researcher Reflexivity and Analytical Positioning

Within the interpretive framework adopted, reflexivity was integral to analysis. The lead researcher's nursing background and clinical experience in paediatric oncology increased sensitivity to the clinical and relational dimensions of participants' accounts, while requiring continued scrutiny of assumptions derived from professional knowledge. Reflexive memos documented emerging interpretations, analytical uncertainties and the possible influence of this positioning on conceptual development (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Across the selected episodes, reflexivity helped question provisional readings, including treating information-related behaviours as distinct response patterns, viewing hope and acceptance as successive stages, or interpreting avoidance of emotionally intense reminders as relational withdrawal. Repeated comparison with related incidents enabled these interpretations to be examined rather than accepted prematurely.

Constant comparison, memo writing and diagramming supported the documentation of decisions, consideration of alternatives and assessment of whether interpretations remained grounded in participants' meanings. They also informed the examination of relationships among subcategories and their integration into the substantive theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Rather than eliminating interpretive influence, reflexivity made it more visible and open to scrutiny, contributing to theoretical sensitivity and coherence between SI, GT procedures and conceptual development (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

6. Final Considerations

The relationship between SI and GT is well established. This article contributes by making visible the interpretive reasoning through which symbolic interactionist assumptions informed category development within Corbin and Strauss' approach.

By reconstructing selected links between interview excerpts, provisional codes, constant comparison, analytical memos and emerging subcategories, the article shows how epistemological positioning can guide concrete analytical decisions without reducing GT to a sequence of technical procedures. This practice-oriented account may help researchers examine more explicitly how meanings, interactions and relationships inform conceptual development and substantive theory construction.

The paediatric oncology study served as an illustrative context rather than the primary empirical focus. The pathways presented are selective and simplified, not an exhaustive reconstruction of the original analysis or a prescriptive model. Their value lies in supporting a more transparent, reflexive and methodologically coherent use of GT across studies concerned with situated meanings and social processes.

Ethical Approval: The original study received a favourable opinion from the competent institutional Health Ethics Committee (Ref. CES.262/021), together with approval of a subsequent amendment (Ref. CES.223/024). To preserve the confidentiality of the specialised research setting and reduce the risk of indirect identification of participants, the institution is not identified in this manuscript. The study was conducted in accordance with the applicable national and international ethical standards for health research.

Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality and anonymity were protected, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw

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