

The challenge for qualitative research in nursing

Dean Whitehead

Abstract

A common consensus regarding the way in which qualitative and quantitative approaches to research are viewed within nursing has existed unchanged for many years, i.e. the quantitative or positivistic research paradigm has traditionally been viewed as being more scientific, logical, rigorous and superior to the naturalistic/qualitative approach. Indeed, there is little evidence to refute the suggestion that these two approaches are perceived as being separate to, and independent of, each other. This article suggests that this long-standing division has served to create many of the problems and barriers surrounding qualitative research in nursing. One of the main reasons for this division results from the inherent interpretation of each approach and also the perceptions of nurse researchers. Qualitative research is traditionally viewed as the weaker of the two approaches and therefore qualitative researchers are often left to actively promote the standing and credibility of this research paradigm. This article aims to identify how nurse researchers can strive to resolve the imbalance that frequently exists between these two paradigms and, consequently, redress any related misconceptions within the nursing profession.

There has long been a common consensus among nursing's academic fraternity that the quantitative research paradigm is more structured and more scientific than the qualitative approach (Harper and Hartman, 1997). The relationship between qualitative and quantitative research designs has over the years been an emotive subject for debate. Such debate, however, often results in the qualitative approach faring poorly in comparison to its quantitative counterpart. For example, Niewiadomy (1993) suggests that some nurse researchers consider that qualitative research does not warrant scientific merit. She states that there are still relatively few nurses who attempt to undertake qualitative research in comparison to quantitative studies.

The negative attitude that has developed towards qualitative research appears, in part, to stem from defining these two approaches and comparing them to one another. For instance, quantitative designs are usually referred to as positivistic, logical, *etic* and deductive in their approach; whereas qualita-

tive approaches are often viewed in opposing terms such as interpretive, *emic* and inductive. One could argue that the root of the 'generic' problem is implicit within the terms used, i.e. for some, there appears to be a common assumption that the quantitative design uses a more formal scientific approach. Consequently, it is suggested that qualitative research, therefore, adopts a more informal approach. Inherent within this assumption, is the supposed relationship or link between the objectivity of scientific design and the associated concepts of credibility and validity. This, in turn, suggests that the quantitative paradigm is viewed, from both a theoretical and clinical perspective, as being more rigorous and, therefore, more acceptable than qualitative research.

The quantitative/qualitative debate

Despite the historical divisions between these two research paradigms having been debated for some time now, the debate between deductive and inductive approaches remains unresolved and is presently ongoing — at least on a theoretical level (Pearson, 1997). However, some authors feel that recent research activity has provided a 'broadening out' effect, i.e. a move away from quantitative domination, which has led to a gradual though somewhat limited acceptance of qualitative approaches (Tilford and Delaney, 1992; Baum, 1995). However, it remains evident that many traditionalist researchers still view these two approaches as opposing, conflicting and competing with each other and as being incompatible. In line with this thinking both approaches are considered, by many, to be distinct entities which are ontologically and epistemologically separate (Harvey, 1990).

It would appear that this debate continues to remain unresolved within nursing academia and one might argue that this is especially so, if one supports the concept that quantitative domination may well exist purely as part of an untruth perpetuated by theoretic-

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