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Review:

Challenges of collecting data in the clinical setting

Gary Rolfe

Despite a recent 'reflexive turn' in nursing research (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000), most writers in academic journals continue to present their research projects as matter-of-fact accounts of a more or less straightforward textbook process. It is very refreshing, then, to come across a research report that begins with the words 'Undertaking a piece of research in the clinical setting is often far more difficult than it appears from descriptions in textbooks.'

This paper, on the trials and tribulations of designing and conducting a non-participant observational study, attempts to offer an antidote to so-called cookbook research, where the procedures can be translated from the page like so many steps in a recipe. Rather than following textbook guidelines of what should happen at each stage of the research process, the author recognises that 'often the answers to challenges encountered in the field are more difficult to solve than is suggested in the clean, bright pages of the research textbooks'. The answers, then, lie in the messy, uncertain realms of practice itself, in what anthropologists have called 'tales of the field' (Van Maanen, 1988).

What makes this study unusual is that it regards research as a practice rather than as a set of straightforward procedures. Just as textbook nursing theory and procedural guidelines from Schön's 'high hard ground' cannot simply be applied in the 'swampy lowland' of nursing practice (Schön, 1983), so textbook research theory and guidelines cannot simply be applied to the swampy lowland of research practice.

But if textbooks cannot be trusted to 'tell it like it is', and if the researchers have little experience of their own to draw on, what is to be done? The answer is to be found not in textbooks but in research reports. For the author of this paper, the tales of the field brought back by experienced observational researchers include not only tales about the practices they were ostensibly observing, but also tales about their own practice as researchers.

This point is important for all researchers, since it suggests that there is a vast store of knowledge and wisdom about the practice of

research that exists not in textbooks, but in research papers. For example, while the textbooks speak abstractly of 'three main types of positioning approaches' (Polit et al., 2001), actual studies elaborate on the need to be within hearing distance, on how to dress, and on the problem of following the subject 'like a shadow', at the same time 'keeping a discreet distance when intimate practices or discussions were taking place'. Similarly, whereas the textbooks speak of the 'insider-outsider' dilemma in observational research, it is the studies themselves that ultimately answer the question of 'when and to what extent and for what purpose [the nurse researcher] would intervene and be present in a situation that went against standard nursing practice'.

The author makes a fine job of uncovering some of the experiential knowledge and wisdom buried in previously published observational studies, and this paper therefore makes a useful complement to the drier and more straightforward textbook accounts of non-participant observational research.

It is perhaps a shame that a paper which places so much emphasis on learning from the experiences of other researchers does not offer much in the way of the author's own research experience. However, despite this minor gripe, the paper promotes the important message that the practice of research, like the practice of nursing, takes place largely in the swampy lowlands where 'decisions ... often depend on the morality of the researcher, the researcher's creativity and, indeed, pure common sense'.

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