

## Nursing research conventions: objectivity or obfuscation?

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This paper is a critique of naïve realism, the philosophy which animates much nursing research, and which leads researchers to assume that the attainment of objective knowledge is possible. The nature of naïve realism, and its relationship to objectivity, is discussed. Central to this outlook is the belief that the values and interests of the researcher can and should be divorced from the prosecution of research. This is reflected in the literary convention of referring to the researcher in the third person. Contrary to this position, I argue that the interpretations, values and interests of the researcher are central to the research process. Moreover, nursing research may be affected by the interests of managers, educationalists, and those who wish to see nursing attain professional status. Nursing researchers should accept that they are part of the social situations which they study. They should therefore become reflexive in their outlook. This entails recognizing and attempting to understand the effects of the researcher, rather than trying to eliminate or ignore them.

### INTRODUCTION

Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject'; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason', 'absolute spirituality', 'knowledge in itself': these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unimaginable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'.

(Nietzsche 1969, italics in original)

### Background assumptions

Gouldner (1971) has observed that theories contain both open postulations and what he calls 'background assumptions'. While these assumptions may not be expressly

formulated, or even noticed, they are of considerable significance:

Background assumptions are embedded in a theory's postulations. Operating within and alongside of them, they are, as it were, 'silent partners' in the theoretical enterprise. Background assumptions provide some of the bases of choice and the invisible cement for linking together postulations. From beginning to end, they influence a theory's formulation and the research to which it leads.

Gouldner (1971)

In this paper, I will address one of the background assumptions embedded in the theory of nursing research, namely an adherence to naïve realism. I will argue that acceptance of this assumption is the basis for a belief in the possibility of objective knowledge, unsullied by the idiosyncrasies of particular observers. This belief finds expression in the literary convention of using the third person to describe the researcher in nursing research reports.

Representation of reality is achieved by the immersion of the researcher in the social milieu being examined (Malinowski 1964).

While rejecting the artificiality of the experimental method, naturalism shares with positivism a naïve realist outlook (Hammersley 1992). It assumes that the natural world of actors can be portrayed unproblematically. In other words, that it is possible to 'tell it as it is', to use the title of Melia's (1982) qualitative study of the world of student nurses. Melia argues that the purpose of her paper is to allow the students she studied to tell what it is really like to be a student. This, of course, assumes that Melia herself does not impinge on the tale that they have to tell.

As with positivism, this epistemological relegation of the researcher from the research equation is mirrored in the language used. Consider, for example, the following extract from Melia's (1982) study. Even when she is describing her familiarity with the experiences of her subjects, a familiarity which, *ipso facto*, entails prior assumptions on her part, she still maintains the linguistic convention of disassociation from the study:

*the researcher was to some degree familiar with the setting of which the students provided their accounts. The researcher had practised as a nurse and, as such, was familiar with nursing jargon and hospital ways in general. In this respect, then, the researcher did not enter the situation from a position of entire naïveté. However the researcher's experience of nurse training was not that of a conventional 3-year programme . . .*

(Melia 1982, my italics)

## THE CONVENTION OF NEUTRAL OBSERVATION LANGUAGE

To be fair to Melia, the ungainly prose of this extract is far from unusual; nor is it accidental. If it is believed that it is possible to capture the natural reality of a social situation, then there is no room to accommodate the personal influences of the researcher in the explanation. Accepting the remit of 'telling it as it is' assumes that we can know how it is, irrespective of the values and interests that the researcher brings with her to the research field. In other words, it assumes the possibility of objective knowledge. This knowledge is expressed in the language of neutral observation.

The assumptions of positivism are remarkably similar. It is believed that 'Scientific theories must be founded upon . . . descriptions that simply correspond to the state of the world, involving no theoretical assumptions and thus being beyond doubt' (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983). As a consequence, idiosyncratic characteristics of the observer

have no place in the production of knowledge, and must therefore be eschewed. Use of the first person implies that the observer has influenced the nature of the results and is therefore avoided in order to indicate objectivity.

The influence of the conventions of positivism upon nursing research remains strong. There are numerous examples of nursing studies that use the traditional experimental format of textual construction, which, among other characteristics, involves demurring at the use of the first person. Perusal of almost any nursing journal will demonstrate to the reader the ubiquity of this approach (see, for example McHaffie (1990), Waterhouse (1991) and Pelletier (1992) for recent instances of this style in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing*).

### The possibility of objectivity

It is highly dubious whether the sort of 'objectivity' aspired to by both naturalism and positivism is possible. Both models tend to assume that data can be collected without recourse to the theoretical assumptions of the collector. Such a position ignores the importance of interpretation in our understanding of the world. It is impossible to describe what we observe, free from theoretical and conceptual assumptions and implications (Hanson 1958, Keat & Urry 1982). Without preconceptions of some kind, even the identification of issues or situations would be impossible (Heidegger 1962, Eagleton 1991). It is indeed naïve to assume that the absolute truth about a phenomenon can be discovered:

*Empirical phenomena are descriptively inexhaustible; we can provide multiple, true descriptions of any scene. How one describes an object on any particular occasion depends on what one takes to be relevant. And given that the value of truth underdetermines descriptions, other values and concerns must play a constitutive role in their production.*

(Hammersley 1990, italics in original)

Values and theoretical assumptions will be influenced by a number of factors, including the heritage of earlier writers, the socio-economic status of the observer, the cultural and political milieu she is situated in, and the influence of the observer's individual personality (Myrdal 1970).

### The significance of the author

Asserting the effects of the researcher upon research is not merely a meta-theoretical quibble; it is of considerable practical significance, affecting profoundly the way in

purport to be free of researcher influence (Hammersley 1990).

## VALUES, INTERESTS AND NURSING RESEARCH

There is no reason to believe that nursing research has escaped the pitfalls experienced by other disciplines. Indeed, there are very good reasons to suppose that there are values and interests which consistently and systematically influence nursing research.

Echoing Mill's (1970) critique of abstracted empiricism, Dingwall & McIntosh (1978) argue that, because nursing researchers usually have to gain official permission for access to their subjects, the interests and views of élite administrative groups have to be respected. This means that research problems tend to be defined in terms employed by those in senior positions. The influence over research enjoyed by managers may well mean that critical issues are avoided in favour of superficial 'fact gathering'.

Managerial concerns are not the only interests at play. Much current nursing theory and research is directed at issues related to the 'New Nursing', to use Salvage's (1990) appellation. However, emphasis on research may have as much to do with the promotion of occupational advancement as with concern for improved patient care. Here we can see the influence of the academic, rather than the administrative, élite on the direction of research. Melia (1987) has argued that the aim of academic professionalizers is to achieve autonomy for nursing through promotion of a style of practice founded on research-generated nursing theory (with all the academic kudos that this entails), rather than on tradition and medical dominance. In this context, research is not simply a disinterested activity, it is also an integral part of an occupational strategy.

### Identity of interests

It is hard to believe that the values and interests embodied in the occupational aspirations of nursing researchers will not affect their work. While commentators such as Pearson (1988) have attempted to conflate nursing autonomy with patient autonomy, it cannot be assumed that the goals of nurses are identical to the interests of patients (Salvage 1992). At the very least, the assumption of identity of interests should be regarded as problematical by nursing researchers. However, naïve realist beliefs about the insulation of research from the interests of the researcher inhibit this sort of self-criticism.

Identification of occupational interests may also go some way towards explaining the popularity of positivist,

quantitative modes of investigation within the nursing research community. Quantitative analysis is the method most closely associated with natural science. Given the prestige that science enjoys, the adherence of nursing researchers to scientific trappings may in part be explained by the status that use of these methods confers, rather than by their pertinence. The myth of science involves powerful claims to explanation and control. It is understandable, then, that 'a would-be research-based profession is going to be strongly attracted by such an appeal, however spurious it might be' (Dingwall & McIntosh 1978).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF REFLEXIVITY

Given that I have identified a major flaw in the philosophical foundations of nursing research, it is incumbent upon me to at least point to an alternative theoretical base. The approach that I would advocate is the development of 'reflexivity'. At a general level, reflexivity 'concerns those practices that simultaneously describe and constitute a social setting' (Rogers 1983). Specifically in relation to research, it involves the realization that researchers are part of the social world that they study. Acceptance of this inescapable fact has a number of beneficial consequences for research.

Rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher, reflexive researchers try to understand them (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983). Reflexivity entails researchers viewing their own beliefs in the same fashion as they view those held by their subjects (Gouldner 1971). It requires an honest examination of the values and interests that may impinge upon research work. For example, it might be appropriate for the nurse researcher to discuss how her conception of the occupational mobility of nursing colours her choice of method, or her assessment of 'new nursing' procedures.

It should be noted that reflexivity can be useful at a very practical level, shedding new light on the day-to-day problems that researchers face. For instance, in his comparison of reflexive and non-reflexive survey research methods, Schuman (1982) describes how perennial methodological problems can be transformed into opportunities:

The simple approach to survey research takes responses literally, ignores interviewers as sources of influence, and treats sampling as unproblematic. A person who proceeds in this way is quite likely to trip and fall right on his artifact. The scientific survey, on the other hand, treats survey research as a

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