

Thoughts regarding researchers utilizing Grounded Theory*

REFLEXÕES SOBRE O PESQUISADOR NAS TRILHAS DA TEORIA FUNDAMENTADA NOS DADOS

REFLEXIONES SOBRE EL INVESTIGADOR EN LA SENDA DE LA TEORÍA FUNDAMENTADA EN LOS DATOS

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive-reflexive study was performed with the objective to present the characteristics of researchers who use the Grounded Theory method, and outline the development of aptitudes for the researcher to become a Grounded Theoretician. The theoretical discussion was based on the frameworks of this methodology and supported by the literature. The article presents the main demands of qualitative studies using Grounded Theory, and important behaviors, attitudes and characteristics developed by the researchers. It is concluded that learning about Grounded Theory involves more than operationalizing a group of procedures and techniques. It also involves facing challenges to change one's attitude as a researcher and develop new ways of thinking and researching, gathering knowledge based on data to form a theory.

DESCRIPTORS

Nursing
Nursing research
Nursing methodology research
Qualitative research

RESUMO

Estudo de natureza descritivo-reflexiva, objetivando apresentar as características do pesquisador que utiliza o método Teoria Fundamentada nos Dados e delinear reflexões sobre o desenvolvimento das aptidões do pesquisador para tornar-se um Teórico Fundamentado. A discussão teórica foi embasada nos referenciais dessa metodologia e apoiada na literatura. O artigo apresenta as principais demandas de estudos qualitativos com a *Grounded Theory* e importantes comportamentos, atitudes e características desenvolvidas pelos pesquisadores. Constatou-se que a aprendizagem acerca da Teoria Fundamentada nos Dados vai além da habilidade para operacionalizar um conjunto de procedimentos e técnicas. Implica, também, em desafios de transformação na postura como pesquisador e em novas formas de pensar e pesquisar, reunindo conhecimentos a partir dos dados para formar uma teoria.

DESCRITORES

Enfermagem
Pesquisa em enfermagem
Pesquisa metodológica em enfermagem
Pesquisa qualitativa

RESUMEN

Estudio de naturaleza descriptivo-reflexiva que objetiva presentar las características del investigador que utiliza el método Teoría Fundamentada en los Datos y delinear reflexiones sobre el desarrollo de las aptitudes del investigador para transformarse en un Teórico Fundamentado. La discusión teórica se basó en los referenciales de esa metodología y obtuvo apoyo en la literatura. El artículo presenta las principales demandas de estudios cualitativos con la *Grounded Theory* e importantes comportamientos, actitudes, características desarrolladas por los investigadores. Se constata que el aprendizaje de la Teoría Fundamentada en los Datos va más allá de la habilidad para poner en operatividad un conjunto de procedimientos y técnicas. Implica también desafíos de transformación en la postura como investigador y nuevas formas de pensar e investigar, reuniendo conocimientos a partir de los datos para expresar una teoría.

DESCRIPTORES

Enfermería
Investigación en enfermería
Investigación metodológica en enfermería
Investigación cualitativa

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INTRODUCTION

This descriptive and reflexive study emerged from experiences in the graduate subject *Qualitative Research Methods: the Grounded Theory Approach*, offered at *Escola de Enfermagem Anna Nery of Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro*, in the second semester of 2009, and activities in the interest group: *Grounded Theory*. On the occasion of the subject, the group is integrated, providing interested students with learning on the methodological and analytic procedures, as well as the theoretical constructs supporting research techniques.

The teaching-learning strategies, put in practice in seminars, presentations, critical readings, interest group meetings and group debates stimulated growth, based on the apprehension of new contents and opportunities to share theoretical and practical knowledge in research. This whole intellectual mobilization was experienced both individual and collectively.

Thus, learning about Grounded Theory (GT) as a qualitative method goes beyond the skill to put in practice a set of procedures and techniques. It also involves a new form of thinking an researching on a certain social reality in Nursing, joining knowledge based on data and study them to establish a theory.

This challenge implied changes in our posture as researchers. For nursing, Grounded Theory represents a very promising methodological framework for qualitative research, as it permits knowledge construction about phenomena that have hardly or not been explored, deriving from nursing practice, as well as the proposal of theories rooted in the data. These theories can considerably contribute to Nursing knowledge and practice, as they emerge from the investigation of human interactions and from the meanings the social actors attribute⁽¹⁾.

This study aims to: presents the characteristics of researchers who use the Grounded Theory method and reflect on the development of investigators' aptitudes to become Grounded Theory researchers.

THE RESEARCHER IN THE QUALITATIVE APPROACH USING GROUNDED THEORY

Qualitative research is considered, from an inter/cross-disciplinary focus as a set of multiple practices, methods, forms and a multi-paradigmatic focus. The term itself *qualitative* refers to an emphasis on the qualities of processes, of social experience, of meanings, i.e. of what cannot be experimentally measured. Qualitative researchers, influenced by multiple ethical and political postures, are committed to understanding and interpreting human

experience. Therefore, in qualitative studies, they underline reality in its socially constructed nature, the values of the investigation, the relation between researchers and their objects and the challenges of research⁽²⁾.

The qualitative research laboratory is daily life and, therefore, the development, description and operation of theory in qualitative studies will be the result and product of the investigation process. To advance on the consolidation of Nursing as a Science, it is fundamental to develop theories that sustain specific nursing knowledge and, consequently, that this is the base of autonomous and evidence-based practice⁽³⁾.

In general, what marks researchers who, instigated by some practical question, focus on a qualitative project, are attributes like intuition and sensitivity. During the study, however, some other characteristics and skills emerge or are even developed. Qualitative researchers who intend to accomplish a study through Grounded Theory, like in other qualitative approaches, need to keep in mind the

commitment emphasized above and, at the same time, examine techniques and methodological procedures. In the trajectory the different phases and requirements of Grounded Theory (GT) research need to follow, they need to develop aptitudes to become Grounded Theory researchers.

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Two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, originally developed Grounded Theory as a research method in 1967, under the influence of earlier approaches, especially analytic induction and Symbolic Interaction, established in sociology since the Chicago School. They qualitative analytic rules they proposed influenced a large number of contemporary qualitative methods. According to them, in contrast with *a priori* theoretical orientation, theories should be based, rooted in

the data obtained in the field, especially in actions, interactions and social processes. Thus, research should produce or discover a theory to explain the phenomenon⁽⁴⁾.

Qualitative research is ground for multiple interpretative practices. Especially concerning Grounded Theory, this methodological mode is rooted in the epistemological posture of Interpretivism, according to which social/human action is inherently significant, i.e. it has intentional contents, a system of meanings it belongs to. In this sense, researchers are responsible for understanding the meaning that constitutes this action. This understanding is an intellectual process through which researchers gain knowledge about the object⁽⁵⁾.

In other words, the main aim of Grounded Theory is to produce theoretical constructs that explain human action inserted in its social context. The social processes emerging from this scenario are the bases for the investigator to explain the phenomenon, through interpretation, using

inductive and deductive approaches. Therefore, the theory that emerges from the investigation is based on data instead of a pre-existing theoretical body⁽⁶⁾.

The value of this method is precisely the ability not only to create the theory, but to derive it from the qualitative data that were joined. For the analysis process, interpretation is the key elements, which is exhaustively systematic. In contrast with theories deriving from speculations or experience-based concepts, grounded theories tend to picture reality more and, consequently, offer greater discernment and understanding of the research phenomenon⁽⁷⁾.

INVESTIGATOR CHARACTERISTICS AND APTITUDES TO BECOME A GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCHER

Creative attitude, curiosity and esthetic look

Creativity and curiosity constitute important tools that favor a change in our way of seeing the world, as they stimulate reflection and inquiry. It is fundamental for researchers to be able to learn by themselves; through the practice of cognitive strategies; through the activity to invent, create and through reflexive consciousness⁽⁸⁾.

In an ethical perspective, a scientific study demands commitment from researchers, which goes beyond the achievement of results and the study conclusion. This commitment surpasses methodological requirements and research techniques. There should be a desire to change reality, to transform it, to recreate it. This spring for human ethics should be valued in knowledge production and in the development of nursing researchers.

To obtain a transformation that will be consolidated, creativity is needed. Producing knowledge that intends to transform social reality is a creative activity. A creative horizon is capable of detaching researchers from the mere reproduction of what exists, from the immediate, and projects them into the future, to what emerges and is almost always unknown. A creative individual establishes an esthetic relation with reality, based on sensitivity, going beyond the physical and concrete existence of the object⁽⁹⁾.

For Grounded Theory researchers, the interpretive process is the foundation that permeates the whole trajectory of data coding and categorization. This process should be well described, detailed and reviewed, demanding a constant curious look on the data from researchers and a creative and esthetic relation to organize and present them, besides establishes connections among the categories and, finally, presenting the paradigmatic model (when this is the goal).

The constant look of curiosity on the data is the element that allows researchers, during the entire analytic process, to seek new reading angles, new senses for the configuration of hardly explored realities in scientific terms. Curiosity associated with creative attitude contributes to significantly apprehend the phenomenon.

Critical thinking, flexibility and openness to exchange

Scientific knowledge is an important value in nursing actions, enhancing the exercise of autonomy. For evidence-based and high-quality nursing practice, it is fundamental for nurses, in the wide range of contexts they are inserted in, to be research consumers and/or producers, through educational processes and practical experience. Research is, then, a link between theory, education and practice. The qualitative research process itself contributes to the development of reflexive thinking and critical reading skills, through which researchers analyze the data collected in the field⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾.

The first and important step is to understand that phenomena are complex and, hence, that meanings are not easy to understand. To study a phenomenon using Grounded Theory, researchers need to be self-reflexive. This means saying that they need to use the flow of ideas, those deriving from the wealth of data as well as theoretical ideas, as this will help them to make the study analytically dense. They need to develop the ability to return, as often as necessary, to critically analyze situations and acknowledge research trends and biases⁽⁷⁾.

Gaining critical thinking takes time and demands intellectual involvements, as well as researchers' gradual and constant development. At the same time as it is considered a very rational process, it is highly emotional. Thinking critically is reasoning, examining concepts, ideas, assertions, beliefs, actions, inferences, presuppositions, principles, arguments, reasons, justifications, characteristics, examples and experiences. It is the art of thinking consciously about one's own and other people's thinking, questioning the propriety of the contents, measuring and applying models or criteria to assess and interpret⁽¹²⁾.

Critical thinking skills on the data are fully demanded from researchers who use Grounded Theory. They need to face their data as precious materials that will allow them to make comparisons and discover properties and dimensions, as these are what the grounded theory will emerge from. They need to intensely work on and appreciate what can be done with the data, based on their interaction in the interpretation process. Flexibility and openness to useful criticism are two other important characteristics that are strongly emphasized in training seminars for researchers using this method. During all research phases, exchange of ideas and interchange deriving from group discussions are highly beneficial attitudes for researchers' learning and development, as well as for the quality of the research⁽⁷⁾.

This is one among other reasons for the existence of interest groups, courses and research seminars that allow participants solid learning of the method. This learning covers not only the research procedures, but also the experience of sharing the knowledge, analytic focus and findings in a genuine cooperation with colleagues, avoiding competitive discourse and destructive criticism.

Theoretical sensitivity and commitment to the interviewees and society

Theoretical sensitivity is a fundamental requisite to acknowledge the relevance of certain concepts, the importance of certain facts and the theoretical weight obtained from the data to develop the grounded theory. It is developed across the whole research work, from the conception of the project, through data analysis, until the theory is designed. This capacity generally increases during the development of the research project, to the extent that the researcher makes efforts to enhance the theoretical density of the analysis⁽⁷⁾.

Theoretical sensitivity refers to the ability to distinguish differences and data variations, in conceptual terms, in the coding and interpretation process of the meanings. Researchers need to deeply understand their data and observe their interaction in research. This ability is based on the knowledge gained in scientific literature, professional experience and especially the researcher's experience in the analytic process of Grounded Theory⁽¹³⁾.

In the context of the post-positivist paradigm, theoretical sensitivity can be considered a criterion of strictness for the grounded theory, as it emphasizes the use of self-reflection, making the researchers demanding with regard to research and analysis questions⁽¹⁴⁾.

For qualitative researchers, the data collection field is not only an environment selected for the research, but also a context in which human relations will demand much more than research techniques. The relations between the researcher and research subject constructed during the study development should be highlighted. These relations established during data collection will guarantee the success of the field research. This demands sensitivity from the researchers to promote dialogue and receptiveness in the study scenario⁽¹⁵⁾.

For researchers who develop a study using Grounded Theory, the field research is essential to enhance the wealth of data. Each meeting with the subjects, whether for interviews or observation, represents an opportunity to apprehend the complexity of the meanings and actions that are socially constructed in daily life. Therefore, in an incessant movement of comings and goings to the data collection field, it is fundamental for researchers to be open to listen, sensitive to words and actions, so as to interpret and code the data the subjects declared or manifested in the scenario.

In qualitative research, the ability to look, listen and write is a requisite to construct knowledge rooted in the researchers' experience and learning. The difficulties, challenges, discoveries and victories in this exercise of sensitivity, approximation and distancing during data collection and analysis are important research steps that need to be socialized.

In general, researchers who use Grounded Theory intensely want to contribute. The method itself determines that the subjects' words and actions be highly valued. Therefore, most researchers hope that their work will be

of direct relevance or potential for the academic and non-academic public⁽⁷⁾.

In the context of this higher target, the constant exercise of sensitivity is fundamental for the researchers, starting with the elaboration of the research questions, based on concerns originating in nursing practice or even from knowledge gaps, even when the intent is to concretize the study contributions based on the results. These phases gain a sense of re-signification of the process of being or becoming a nurse-researcher, as a social actor, not only complying with requirements for the sake of scientific endorsement and advancing to a commitment to effective transforming actions.

Determination

Like other qualitative methods, Grounded Theory is an analytic reference framework that demands researchers' intense involvement in all of its phases and processes, especially regarding energy and time. The participation of research aids is hardly possible and, therefore, an attitude of dedication is necessary⁽¹⁾.

Besides, in qualitative research, the best indicators of research quality are its internal coherence, strict use of the method and the author's fidelity to the theoretical framework. To achieve these indicators, researchers certainly need determination. Specifically in Grounded Theory, the use of techniques and procedures to develop the grounded theory is generally exhaustive for the researchers, demanding an extra dose of effort and determination to reach their targets and achieve the research goals. In this method, the researchers unavoidably become totally absorbed and devoted to the work process, especially due to the need for abstract thinking. Like analysts, they move along with the research and feel safe with the data and results^(7,16).

The constant relation with the data, the concomitant collection and analysis process, the requirement for a detailed description of the entire process, among other Grounded Theory research requisites, can arouse ambiguous feelings of pleasure/displeasure, delight/disgust, desire for approximation/distancing. This intellectual and emotional mobilization indicates the researchers' sensitivity and transformation during the research act.

Determination is the ability to balance this ambiguity and continue to reach targets, without stopping reflexive-critical work, overcoming the obstacles of the fieldwork, the analytic process and deadlines set. All of this demands theoretical discipline, methodological rigor but, above all, knowledge production results from a certain dose of phantasy, emotiveness and motivation⁽⁹⁾.

CONCLUSION

The great scientific and technological revolution nowadays demands new attitudes and conducts from us, nurses, new ways of thinking and acting. Our scientific produc-

tion needs to respond not only to the requisites nursing teaching is confronted with, but also serve as sources of problem-solving transformations in care practice. Thus, we are facing the challenges of constructing valid knowledge that minimizes the great gap existing between what is scientifically produced and what is applied in health actions. Nurse researchers need to be creative subjects, agents of transformation, because Nursing will keep on fighting for social and political conditions that permit humanization and evidence-based practice.

Great advances have been conquered through research aimed at understanding the processes of living, getting ill, caring and being cared for, among other phenomena that are loaded with meanings and conceptions. Qualitative nursing research offers the possibility to approach the subjective dimensions of experiences, human actions and interactions, going beyond the strictly biomedical view, which is common in the discussion of the health-disease process.

Different perspectives, currents and distinct methodological routes exist to address meanings. Choosing one strategy will equally depend on the research problem and

the researcher's positioning in one paradigm. In the list of possibilities, researchers who aim to construct a theory, rooted in data, to explain a study phenomenon have elected Grounded Theory. The strictness and systematic definition of the analytic process in this method have stood out and have influenced the credibility of qualitative results.

In a general perspective, the characteristics and aptitudes highlighted in this paper can apply to any qualitative research. What is particular, however, is that to develop a study based on Grounded Theory, the set of these characteristics is fundamental for researchers to be theoretically sensitive or, in other words, to be capable of using deductive and inductive processes to interpret and attribute concepts with a high level of abstraction.

We consider that Grounded Theory has been greatly welcomed in nursing due to its solid contribution for a better understanding of hardly explored phenomena and for the production of explanatory models and theories. Through its systemization of data collection and analysis, it provides a useful framework to guide researchers in the study of interpersonal activities among people in the care universe.

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