

ONTOLOGICAL ISSUES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN NURSING

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality. Given the complexity of the world within which nursing research is conducted, researchers using qualitative methodologies have had to grapple with this issue. While the issue is unlikely to be conclusively resolved, nonetheless it is worth debating proposing a practical approach to the realist-relativist dichotomy.

Qualitative research has evolved from taking an unproblematic view of the social world to one where the social world is seen as complex. As the traditional period, qualitative research was concerned with valid, reliable and objective interpretations which were considered to hold true over time.¹ This is the view that there is a reality independent of the researcher which can be known. The aim of research in this context is to uncover that reality. However, this was challenged by post-modernism, when a number of different approaches to qualitative research were developed, such as grounded theory, ethnomethodology and phenomenology. Realism was considered to be in conflict with the idea that people construct the social world through interpretation of it and actions based on those interpretations. This leads to the idea that there is not in fact an independent reality awaiting discovery by the researcher but that the social world is comprised of multiple realities and perspectives, each one as relevant as any other. This is known as relativism. In this sense realism and relativism are opposed to one another and pose a philosophical problem for qualitative researchers.

There is an increasing tendency within qualitative research to adopt the relativist position which leads Hammersley² to question the usefulness of the findings generated from studies using this method, given that the multiplicity of accounts produced can each claim legitimacy. If all are legitimate and given the logical conclusion of relativism, then there is no reason to prefer one account to another. That is, the conclusions of research themselves constitute just another account and as such cannot claim to have precedence over any other account. The relevancy of such research can be questioned. In other words, if research is not contributing to knowledge in any meaningful way, then its usefulness may be questioned, particularly in relation to health care research.³

Realism and relativism represent two polarised perspectives on a continuum between objective reality at one end and multiple realities on the other.⁴ Both positions are problematic for qualitative research. The former position is incompatible with the fundamental principle of this research methodology, while the latter leads to questions regarding the function and utility of research. Adopting a realist position ignores the way the researcher constructs interpretations of the findings and assumes that what is reported is a true and faithful interpretation of a knowable and independent reality.⁴ Relativism leads to the conclusion that nothing can ever be known for definite, that there are multiple realities, none having precedence over the other in terms of claims to represent the truth about social phenomena. However, society exists both as an objective and subjective reality.

For Hammersley² the solution is to adopt neither position but one midway between the two, one that he terms subtle realism. This acknowledges the existence of an independent reality, a world that has an existence independent of our perception of it, but denies that there can be direct access to that reality, emphasising instead representation not reproduction of social phenomena. Consistent with this middle course, the author accepts the usefulness of what he terms common-sense knowledge, while at the same time rejecting the notion that all such knowledge is valid in its own terms.² Central to this is a rejection of the view that knowledge is independent of the researcher, whose reality can be known with certainty. Both realism and relativism share this view of knowledge in that both define it in this way as the starting point of their stances. In turn this results in the current dichotomy in qualitative research. The contention is that by avoiding such a definition, the negative implications for research associated with both philosophical perspectives can be avoided.

In appealing for the adoption of a subtle realist approach, Hammersley² is trying to resolve the seemingly intractable issue of realism versus relativism. Qualitative research resists the tendency to fix meanings but instead draw inferences about meaning.³ However the current trend within qualitative research is not to draw such a sharp distinction between the realism and relativism.¹

Qualitative researchers should not become overly concerned with philosophical issues, but remain pragmatic since doing research is a practical activity. Although an old book now, Hammersley's position still has merit and offers a very useful way of thinking about the realist-relativist debate, without getting too involved with issues of philosophy. Some issues in qualitative research have yet to be resolved or more accurately, as the methodology continues to evolve, new issues are created. This is a reflection of the dynamic nature of methodological thinking. Clearly qualitative research has to accommodate these unresolved philosophical issues.

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