



Conceptions of learning research: Variations amongst French and Swedish nurses. A phenomenographic study

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SUMMARY

Background: The development of nursing research capacity and interactions with cultural and structural issues is at various stages throughout Europe. This process appears to be remarkably similar irrespective of the country. Sweden has developed this capacity since the 1990s, whereas France is experiencing a transition. Nevertheless, knowledge about how nurses conceive their learning about nursing research and transitioning toward being researchers is scarce.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to explore French and Swedish RNs' conceptions of research education and educational passage toward research and to describe how learning research contributes to the understanding of their norms and practices.

Design: A phenomenographic approach was used to understand and describe the qualitatively different ways in which French and Swedish RNs conceive research and its apprenticeship.

Settings and Participants: A purposive maximum variation sampling of five French and five Swedish Nurse Researchers with PhDs.

Methods: Individual in-depth interviews conducted in France and Sweden between November 2012 and March 2013 were analysed using phenomenography.

Findings: The analysis revealed one main category, "Organisational factors to sustain individual apprenticeship". Three descriptive categories have emerged from the data and its variations amongst French and Swedish nurses: (1) entrance into research—modes of commitment; (2) nurses' engagement—the need for dedicated support; and (3) research as the means to resolve nursing situations.

Conclusions: This study demonstrates how registered nurses have integrated nursing and researcher roles following different efficient paths. Education in nursing research is part of the strategy needed for the development of nursing research and is supported by the integration of research and practice.

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Introduction

Nursing research combines experience, intellectual ability, and formal systems of thought and contributes to the optimisation of patient care (Polit and Beck, 2012). Nursing research has been developing in Europe for more than 50 years, and although patterns of progress in nursing research in Europe have been outlined (Tierney, 1998), the development of nursing research capacity is dependent on the interaction between cultural and structural problems, as well as changes operating at different scales: individuals, academics, departments, universities, funding bodies, professional associations, and national governments

(Segrott et al., 2006). European progress in nursing research has varied considerably from country to country but has been much faster in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia (Tierney, 2005). Today, research and undergraduate education in France are finally catching up to developments observed at the European level, emphasising nurses' participation in the production of scientific evidence relevant for clinical practice (Hallberg, 2009), a challenge already faced in Sweden.

Background

Nursing Research in Europe: Development of Research Capacity and Education

The development of research capacity is a complex process that demands a combination of structural and cultural elements unfolding within specific contexts (Segrott et al., 2006). Nursing research development requires a sufficient number of interested and committed nurses

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with the necessary skills and knowledge to conduct research. It also necessitates institutional support and infrastructure, including library resources, access to software and databases, dedicated time to pursue research, and dedicated funding (Tierney, 1998; Smith, 2007).

According to Tierney (1998), the chronology of nursing research development across Europe appears to be remarkably similar and tends to progress in four sequential stages: (1) emergence as a “bottom-up” initiative, pioneered by forward-looking nurses; (2) collective activity in the form of “top-down” activities, e.g., government support for research training for nurses and national nurses associations; (3) gradual growth of research infrastructures, mainly the result of entry to or affiliation with the university system; and (4) a shift from ad-hoc opportunistic initiatives to a more strategic approach. Other fundamental aspects have been outlined, such as providing access to research qualifications, access to higher education, and continuous research practice (Tierney, 1998). Internal strategies across European countries have been established (Refer to Box 1), such as reconstructing and reorganising training and reconstituting the roles of teachers and practitioners (Rafferty et al., 1996).

In Europe, a doctoral-level qualification is seen as desirable for nurse educators because it provides the basis for future research leaders in nursing (Spitzer and Perrenoud, 2006; Salminen et al., 2010). Training in nursing research is essential for research utilization and quality improvements in clinical nursing. It is also critical in order to increase the overall research capacity necessary to contribute to nursing's body of knowledge. It is during research training that scientific culture, with its rules and conventions, can be acquired (Dallaire and Blondeau, 2002). However, the actual trends toward harmonising nursing education in Europe do not preclude the singular movements experienced by each country.

Similarities and Differences in Research Integration: Focus on France and Sweden

In Europe, whilst nursing progress and the shift from vocational to academic education have varied considerably from country to country, they have been much faster in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia (Tierney, 2005). Amongst the Scandinavian countries, the shift from vocational to academic took place in Sweden in 1993 (Andersson, 1999; Kapborg, 1998). The first nurses obtaining doctoral degrees at the beginning of the 1980s in Sweden did so in related subjects, such as medicine or pedagogy, since doctoral degrees in nursing did not yet exist (Kapborg, 1998). A truly academic education started in 1993, when it became possible to obtain a Bachelor's Degree in nursing science (Bjorkstrom and Hamrin, 2001). Today, nursing departments offering PhDs in nursing science can be found at 10 universities in Sweden, thus providing a strong basis for the development of their research capacity.

Nursing research in France, on the other hand, has been relatively secluded from the international community due to limited support structures and the difficulty in accessing the English-language scientific community. A reform was launched in 2009 aiming to integrate nursing education into higher education through the Bologna Process.

Box 1

Education for nursing research in Europe, a model strategy adapted from Tierney (1998), p 19.

- The organization of professional education in nursing should allow nurses to have access to the appropriate skill levels to develop the necessary research qualification.
- Practical training for nursing research should take place within the structure of higher education and in institutions of higher learning.
- To promote research of quality, it is necessary to establish research units within departments of higher learning, where qualified nurse researchers may carry out long-term research on a continuous basis.

Furthermore, in 2010 French public hospitals began offering scholarships for nurses wanting to pursue doctoral studies in other disciplines, whilst simultaneously the French government began showing its commitment to nursing research by providing dedicated funding for nursing research (Dupin et al., 2013).

Nursing in France has thus been experiencing a transition from vocational to academic education (Debout et al., 2012). Whereas Registered Nurses (RNs) previously pursued advanced degrees (master's and doctoral studies) in other disciplines (Jovic and Isambart, 2009), recent funds aimed at developing nursing research point to a movement toward recognising nursing as its own academic discipline. However, there is still no doctoral-level nursing degree today because nursing education has still not formally entered higher education (Debout et al., 2012; Dupin et al., 2013).

Countries across Europe have experienced the stages of development in nursing research at their own pace. Sweden rapidly improved their research capacity (Tierney, 1998), whereas French nurses are currently trying to improve theirs. In-depth knowledge can provide insight into how research is conceived amongst French and Swedish RNs, particularly research related to educational issues linked to the evolution of research capacity.

The Study

Aim

The aim of this study was to explore French and Swedish RNs' conceptions of research education and the passage toward research development, as well as describe how learning research contributes to understanding norms and practices. This study sought to achieve the following:

- explore how French and Swedish RNs learned about the research process
- describe how these conceptions shaped their own professional norms and practices.

Design

Phenomenography describes the manifestations of other subjects' conception of a phenomenon or situation. The method implies a content-loaded description of qualitatively different ways in which subjects conceive or experience various phenomena in their surrounding world (Marton and Booth, 1997). Phenomenography is an approach used to identify, formulate, and tackle certain types of research questions and is particularly relevant when trying to understand the learning process (Marton and Booth, 1997). Within phenomenography, it is assumed that conceptions vary not only between persons but also within the same person over time because different aspects of a phenomenon are conceived within a framework in relation to a given context (Barnard et al., 1999).

Phenomenography shares many similarities with phenomenology, and both have human experience and awareness as objects of research (Polit & Beck, 2012; Brammer, 2006). However, the methods have different purposes. In phenomenology, the goal is to describe the essence, i.e., the most invariant meaning, of the phenomena under study, which means that the focus is on similarities. In contrast, the goal of phenomenography is to describe the variation of conceptions in terms of the different aspects that define the phenomenon under study, shifting the focus therefore on differences (Uljen, 1993; Marton and Booth, 1997; Barnard et al., 1999). A central, theoretical concept in phenomenography is “the second order perspective”, i.e., how something is experienced by a person, and how it is conceived to be rather than what it really is, which is considered to be “the first order perspective”. Attention is directed to similarities and differences in individual statements, and the content is used to cluster the conceptions into

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