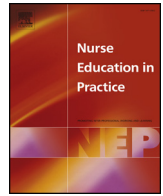




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Original research

Rationale underpinning postgraduate student nurses' choice of research methods used for their masters' theses

Fan-Ko Sun^a, Ann Long^b, Chun-Ying Chiang^c, Hui-Man Huang^d, Yu-Chieh Hou^e, YuChun Yao^{f,*}^a University of Ulster, Department of Nursing, I-Shou University, No.8, Yida Rd., Jiaosu Village, Yanchao District, Kaohsiung City, 82445, Taiwan, ROC^b Honorary Fellow of Ulster University, School of Nursing, Ulster University, 41. North Parade, Ormeau Road, Belfast, BT 72GH, Northern Ireland, UK^c University of Massachusetts, Department of Nursing, I-Shou University, No.8, Yida Rd., Jiaosu Village, Yanchao District, Kaohsiung City, 82445, Taiwan, ROC^d University of Ulster, Department of Nursing, National Quemoy University, No. 1, University Rd. Jinning Township, Kinmen County, 89250, Taiwan, ROC^e Bachelor of I-Shou University, Operation Room, Tainan Municipal An-Nan Hospital, No.66, Sec. 2, Changhe Rd., Annan Dist., Tainan City 709, Taiwan, ROC^f Spalding University, Assistant Professor, Department of Nursing, I-Shou University, No.8, Yida Rd., Jiaosu Village, Yanchao District, Kaohsiung City, 82445, Taiwan, ROC

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ABSTRACT

Many nurses in Taiwan use quantitative research for their master's thesis. However, qualitative research explores humankind in depth providing a more holistic approach relating to nursing. The purpose of this study was to explore the rationale postgraduate students used to choose the research methods for their masters' theses in Taiwan. A descriptive qualitative research design was used. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews of sixteen nursing students studying a master's from seven different Universities in Taiwan in 2016. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Finding revealed three themes (1) Students' personal and professional backgrounds; (2) Myths about quantitative research; (3) Misperceptions about qualitative research. Nurse educators could use these findings as a reference to design post-graduate nursing courses. It is essential to provide a balanced educative experience between delivering qualitative and quantitative modules to enhance respect of research method, knowledge and skills. Further, this could facilitate students' choice in research methods when designing their master's theses.

1. Introduction

Many scholars deem that quantitative research is more scientific, important and trustworthy compared to qualitative research (Duh, 1998; McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015). However, qualitative research can be used as a supplement to quantitative research (Duh, 1998; McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015). Qualitative and quantitative research are not antagonistic, but each has its advantages and limitations. Moreover, the research world would be richer if both methods could be esteemed for their respective advantages (Wang et al., 2011; Yang, 1998). Many studies have found that nursing research is mainly based on quantitative research (Duh, 1998; Lin et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2011). Lin et al. (2003) demonstrated that 80% of nursing students (n = 551) used quantitative research for their master's thesis from 1991 to 2000 in Taiwan. Masters students are generally conducting research for the first time. The method they choose affects their choice of research method in future studies. Consequently, it is important to

understand students' rationale for choosing a research method for their masters' theses.

1.1. Background

In general, quantitative research emphasizes the principles of deduction and logic, focusing on variables that can be measured in human experience. This method can be used to understand the prevalence of particular practices, behaviors, and beliefs and to estimate how the strength of reciprocal causal associations change over time (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). It is objective research and mainly used to measure theories using scientific systematic collection and analysis of data in controlled environments (Duh, 1992; Polit and Beck, 2003). Inversely, qualitative research emphasizes subjectivity, individuality and integrity and is also used to understand meanings, functions, goals and intentions (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). The subjective narrative data are collected using interviews and observation in natural environments. Data are

* Corresponding author. Spalding University, Assistant Professor, Department of Nursing, I-Shou University, No.8, Yida Rd., Jiaosu Village, Yanchao District, Kaohsiung City, 82445, Taiwan, ROC. Tel.: + 886 917113029.

E-mail addresses: sunfanko@isu.edu.tw (F.-K. Sun), drannlong1@hotmail.com (A. Long), chunying@isu.edu.tw (C.-Y. Chiang), x2156@nqu.edu.tw (H.-M. Huang), stephaniehough75@hotmail.com (Y.-C. Hou), yuyuyao@isu.edu.tw (Y. Yao).

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coded and analyzed in an inductive way. Individual experiences are explored in their totality representing the meaning of a lived-experience. Finally, transcribing is used to describe and explain the narratives in the findings (Duh, 1998; Polit and Beck, 2003; Wang et al., 2011).

Several factors affect the choice of preferred methodology. Time and financial considerations are partial reasons for choosing to conduct a quantitative study (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015; Neill, 2005). Collecting qualitative data and transcribing audio-recordings of in-depth interviews are time-consuming process (Liamputtong, 2009; Povee and Roberts, 2014). Accessing quantifiable information and data using tools, which can be analyzed by computer programs is relatively easy in comparison to designing the instruments used in qualitative research. The objective of the study is a key factor in choice. In quantitative research there is, usually, a definitive or clear objective while in qualitative research there may only be an idea or approximation of the objective (McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015; Neill, 2005). A general overall picture pertaining to multiple settings for future quantitative studies can be identified. Qualitative methods, however, may be more restricted in their scope of research (Firestone, 1993; McCusker and Gunaydin, 2015). In addition, quantitative research for example, experimental and quasi-experimental methods coupled with their complementary statistical techniques, are generally introduced more frequently to undergraduate and postgraduate students than qualitative research commonly due to providers lack of expertise (Breen and Darlaston-Jones, 2010). Consequently, students were found to be less confident to conduct qualitative research (Povee and Roberts, 2014).

Davis and Lester (2016), Metz (2001), and Murakami-Ramalho et al. (2008) found that social background including race/ethnicity, social class, and gender influenced post-graduate students' choice of research method. Moreover, social background plays a crucial role when it comes to graduate students identifying their research interests (Metz, 2001). The graduate school is an educative Centre designed to provide students with a broader and deeper knowledge of research. In Taiwan, it takes master's students about 30–36 credits to accomplish their MSc degree. Students are usually required to achieve a research module to complete the programme. Studying a qualitative research module is elective in most of schools (National Defense Medical Center, 2017; National Taiwan University, 2017).

Students from two studies perceived that qualitative research is unscientific, unreasonable, and susceptible to researcher bias (Cooper et al., 2012; Povee and Roberts, 2014). Moreover, qualitative studies have limited places when it comes to publishing and this could be a concern for some students. The mainstream journal requirements for structure, and length are fitted more easily to the quantitative genre and are less smoothly tailored to the qualitative genus, and, also, reviewers might be unfamiliar with qualitative research (Ponterotto and Grieger, 2007; Povee and Roberts, 2014).

Nursing education and practice, coupled with research funding and social background, all impact on the choice of topic and, also, research method. Many post-graduate students choose quantitative research for their master's thesis (Lin et al., 2003). However, the overarching principle of nursing is the care of human-beings. Thus, qualitative research has a lyrical strength when it comes to exploring human-beings within the context of their lives. Chen et al. (2000) claimed that qualitative research is a more appropriate method than quantitative in the study of human care. We argue, it merits equivalent equality of respect as quantitative research in the study of humankind. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore post-graduate masters students' rationale for choosing a research method for their thesis in Taiwan.

2. Method

2.1. Design

Qualitative approaches are valuable researchers aim to explore a complex issue in great detail and depth. Moreover, qualitative

researchers study lived experiences while attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the in-depth meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The purpose of this study was to explore the rationale underpinning nurses' choice of research method for their masters' theses. Consequently, a descriptive qualitative research design was used.

2.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was used to collect rich information data (Huang and Lei, 2013). The inclusion criteria of participants included: (1) currently studying for a master's degree, (2) successfully completed a research module, (3) had decided the type of research method (quantitative research or qualitative research) they were using for their master's thesis, (4) agreed to participate in this study and signed the informed-consent form. The exclusion criterion of participants was postgraduate students who had not decided the topic of their nursing master's thesis.

2.3. Data collection

Data were collected from seven different Universities in Taiwan in 2016. Each participant attended one semi-structured interview in a private room for approximately 45–60 min. The initial interview guide included participants' perceptions of: (1) quantitative research, (2) qualitative research, (3) reason for choosing the research method for their master's thesis, (4) influencing reasons for their choice, (5) difficulties associated with their choosing of research method, and (6) recommendations for developing postgraduate nursing research modules at master's level. The total number of participants was 16 achieving data saturation.

2.4. Ethical considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (105-023). Before conducting the interviews, participants were given important information, which included: the purpose of the study; their right to withdraw without explanation at any time with the knowledge that any data collected from them would be deleted; confidentiality, with the caveat that information synthesized would be presented in a paper in the future; anonymity, that numbers would be used instead of their names. After they understood their rights and agreed to participate in this study, they signed the informed consent form and interviews were arranged.

2.5. Rigor

Four standards were used to establish the rigor of this study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). They were: (1) Credibility: two participants were invited to review and member-check all created meaning units, sub-themes, and themes to ensure they were accurate representations of their experience and meanings. (2) Transferability: the content of the interviews was transferred into transcript verbatim and presented in this study without researchers' personal opinions. (3) Dependability: two nursing research specialists, who are trustworthy regarding qualitative research, reviewed all the created meaning units, sub-themes, and themes to verify that they corresponded with those of the researchers. (4) Confirmability: the original material, which included transcripts verbatim together with the data analysis records, would be safely preserved for future verification and reference.

2.6. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected for this study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This included six-steps: (1) familiarizing with data: listening skills and reading interview transcripts to

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