



Review

A guide to critiquing a research paper. Methodological appraisal of a paper on nurses in abortion care



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SUMMARY

In this paper, we have taken a previously published article on nurses' judgements in abortion care performing a systematic critique of the merits of this research using a recognised critiquing framework.

Objectives:

- 1 Explain the various stages of critiquing using a published guide.
- 2 To critique a published qualitative research paper which uses grounded theory.
- 3 Provide a template for critiquing.

Design: The qualitative paper chosen for the critique is a grounded theory design and the research terms and terminology associated with this method such as symbolic interactionism are defined.

The published paper reported on findings from a study exploring the characteristics of nurses in abortion care. *Review Methods:* A published critiquing tool has been applied. It was chosen because it is pragmatic, clearly laid out and accessible as full text to the people likely to need it. It comprises two stages, the first of which centres on the believability of the research. The second stage is more detailed and examines the research process and establishes the credibility of the research in its application to practice.

Outcome: Develop critical and analytical skills through methodically appraising the merits of published research. *Conclusion:* Nursing as an evidence-based profession requires nurses at both pre- and post-registration levels to be able to understand, synthesise and critique research, this being a fundamental part of many nursing curricula. These have become core skills to acquire since implementing up to date evidence is the cornerstone of contemporary nursing practice.

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Introduction

Developing and maintaining proficiency in critiquing research have become a core skill in today's evidence-based nursing. In addition, understanding, synthesising and critiquing research are fundamental parts of all nursing curricula at both pre- and post-registration levels (NMC, 2011). This paper presents a guide, which has potential utility in both practice and when undertaking academic studies.

The purpose of this paper is to show how published research can be systematically appraised using the critiquing framework by Coughlan et al. (2007a,b). This paper, is the second critique undertaken by the authors (Fothergill and Lipp, 2014), the first of which applied Coughlan's critiquing tool for quantitative studies (Coughlan et al., 2007a,b).

Our rationale for choosing this paper is that according to Bailey et al. (2002), qualitative research forms an important evidence base for nursing. This anecdotal evidence is confirmed by Miller (2010) who claims that qualitative approaches are favoured by nurses over quantitative research. Moreover, qualitative research methods are commonly chosen by nurses to critique for their academic assignments.

The paper chosen to be critiqued was written by one of the authors and is a qualitative study entitled "Conceding and Concealing Judgement in Termination of Pregnancy: a Grounded Theory Study published in the Journal of Research in Nursing" (Lipp, 2010). The chosen paper reported on findings from a study exploring the characteristics of nurses in abortion care. This study formed part of the researcher's Post-doctoral Fellowship in the Research Capacity Building Collaboration (RCBC, Wales), between 2006 and 2008. RCBC brings together a 'Community of Scholars' who are undertaking doctoral or post-doctoral research (RCBC Wales, 2014).

For clarity, we have used the term researcher for the original author (AL), the use of critic refers to the reader, whereas AF and AL will be referred to as the authors.

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Developing and Maintaining the Skill

Commonly, academic research method modules will include some sort of critiquing process. The complexity of the task will vary depending on academic level and course focus; nevertheless the principles remain the same. This article will demonstrate how a recognised framework can be used to undertake a critique on a specific research article, in addition to providing a step by step guide to critiquing a qualitative research study, namely grounded theory.

Using a Framework

This critique will primarily employ a critiquing tool developed by Coughlan et al. (2007a,b) as it is pragmatic, clearly laid out and accessible as full text to the people likely to need it. The authors recognise that there are many other critiquing tools available, which critics may prefer to use. Whichever tool is used, the underlying principles of critiquing remain the same.

Coughlan et al.'s (2007a,b) tool divides the critique into two sections.

Section One – Elements Influencing the Believability of the Research

The believability of the research is important, but inevitably this section will be brief as the main critique will focus on the robustness of the research.

Writing Style

Is the report well written – concise, grammatically correct, avoid the use of jargon? Is it well laid out and organised?

The paper is written for a very specialist audience who would likely be interested in abortion care. Even so, jargon is kept to a minimum, and the style is concise and uses correct grammatical phrasing. The paper is clearly written and follows the conventional style for reporting research (Sollaci and Pereira, 2004).

Author

Do the researcher's qualifications/position indicate a degree of knowledge in this particular field?

A brief Google search on the researcher showed that she has varied research and academic expertise, which bodes well for a credible research study. It retrieved some publications relating to this topic by the researcher, which indicates standing in the field. However, no other papers on nurses in abortion care were retrieved before 2009, which indicates that the researcher was new to the field at that time and this reduces the potential credibility of this study.

A more in depth search revealed her different theoretical perspectives and underpinning philosophies ranging from positivist to constructivist/interpretive standpoints (Jolley, 2013). This informs the reader of potential biases of the research from inception to dissemination. The article will be critiqued on its own merit keeping in mind how the perspectives can influence the critic's interpretation of the research (Moule and Goodman, 2009). The article provides a brief summary of the researcher's career and her qualifications. This allows the critic to determine her knowledge of the field (Lipp, 2010).

Report Title

Is the title clear, accurate and unambiguous?

The title is clear, but could be misleading, as it does not mention the term 'nurse'. In addition, this term does not feature in the key words. Retrieval of the article may also have been enhanced by including the terms 'judgement' and 'attributes' in the key words.

Abstract

Does the abstract offer a clear overview of the study, including the research problem, sample, methodology, findings and recommendations?

The structure and length of this section are normally stipulated by the journal. Notwithstanding this, as suggested by Parahoo (2006) the abstract has successfully provided a short summary of what the research was about, how it was carried out and what was found.

Section Two – Elements Influencing the Robustness of the Research

Statement of the Phenomenon of Interest

Is the phenomenon to be studied clearly identified? Are the phenomena of interest and the research question consistent?

A phenomenon is defined by Polit and Beck (2006) as an abstract concept. In this case, the phenomenon studied was identified as being the affective attributes of nurses/midwives articulated in abortion care. Commonly qualitative research explores ideas and does not necessarily have a predetermined question at the outset. In keeping with this idea, no research question was stated in the article and so consistency between the two was not possible to judge. Instead, there was a secondary aim of exploring how the attributes affect care given by nurses/midwives involved. Limiting the research to aims is in keeping with the qualitative paradigm. This defines research as a process of discovery where the researcher should not be constrained by narrow questions, but instead should be sufficiently flexible to absorb and interpret multiple realities in a natural setting (Streubert and Carpenter, 2011).

Purpose/Significance of the Study

Is the purpose of the study/research question clearly identified?

The section 'aims of the study' is clear and states the two aims discussed above.

Literature Review

Has a literature review been undertaken? Does it meet the philosophical underpinnings of the study?

Does the review of the literature fulfil its objectives?

A literature review was undertaken and due to the nature of the research approach it was preliminary. However, it was not based on a clear literature search strategy. For example, a structured approach to searching the literature is more commonly found in quantitative research using guides for example PICO (population, intervention, comparison and outcome) (Sackett et al., 2000).

In grounded theory, there is a debate as to how extensive any literature review should be at the outset of the research as the aim of grounded theory research is to avoid being unduly influenced by previous work in a particular field (Charmaz, 2006). In keeping with the exploratory nature of grounded theory, researchers tend to take a more pragmatic approach to the literature review, which was the case in this paper (Lipp, 2010).

STARLITE is an acronym devised by Booth (2006) that advocates the use of headings including limiters, exclusion, inclusion criteria etc. in a literature search section. This would have made the literature search more explicit in articulating each element of the search process.

The critic is left to judge its comprehensiveness and decide whether the literature review is complete.

It is interesting to note that in this section the qualitative critique (Coughlan et al., 2007a,b), unlike the critique of quantitative research (Coughlan et al., 2007a,b), does not require the critic to comment on the age of research included in the literature review. This is in keeping with the premise that some qualitative research would be discovering new areas of knowledge that had not previously been explored or could draw on seminal texts, which may be considered dated. For example, the grounded theory in this research was shaped by Goffman's (1963) influential work on stigma.

It appears that the literature review fulfilled the objectives required and seemingly meets the philosophical underpinnings of the study. The critic is referred to Coughlan et al. (2007a,b) for further guidance on the appropriate approach to the literature in qualitative research.

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