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TITLE

Researcher reflections on developing the conceptual framework to support a constructivist grounded theory study of compassion in nursing

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research design often requires researchers to develop a conceptual framework, providing a structured approach to guide the implementation of their study (Ravitch and Riggan 2012). Conceptual frameworks do not arbitrarily exist, however. Rather, they are constructed by the researcher as a direct result of questions arising from experience, existing knowledge and exploration of extant evidence (Maxwell 2005). The conceptual framework affords clarity to the direction of research, by identifying what is currently understood about the phenomenon of interest. This provides a focus for the generation of new knowledge (Marshall and Rossman 2006) and a structured approach to support the research methodology (Miles and Huberman 1994). The notion of developing conceptual frameworks can prove challenging to the novice researcher. This paper therefore presents a comprehensive account of the approach taken to develop the conceptual framework that underpinned a constructivist grounded theory study of compassion in nursing, which was the focus of doctoral research.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Compassion in nursing has traditionally been accepted as an integral philosophy of contemporary nursing practice (Straughair 2012). However, concerns about compassion have arisen following increasing reports of individuals encountering negative experiences of nursing care (The Patients Association 2009, The Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Inquiry 2010, The Parliamentary and Health Care Ombudsman 2011, The Patients Association 2011). Although there is a range of evidence which provides insight into compassion, this mainly arises from conceptual analyses, political influences, professional

guidance and a limited range of original research which predominately focuses on the professional perspective. This highlighted a significant gap in knowledge, supporting the rationale to implement a constructivist grounded theory research study to explore compassion, exclusively through the perceptions of individuals who had personal experience of nursing care.

The sample population was identified through an established university service user and carer group. These individuals had identified themselves as having experience of nursing care and were involved in educational strategies to share their experiences with undergraduate student nurses. As a result of this experience, individuals were positioned as an appropriate target sample to address the research question:

“what do individuals perceive compassion to involve and how do their personal experiences of nursing care contribute to this?”

DEVELOPING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Prior to commencing the study, questions from the researcher’s doctoral supervisory team began to emerge in relation to the underpinning conceptual framework, regarded by many to be an essential component of robust qualitative research methodologies (Ravitch and Riggan 2012). At this early stage of the research process, the conceptual framework had not been considered in any depth. This created a challenge for the researcher in terms of how to approach this, raising awareness that to progress this specific study, a reflexive approach was required to support the development of a conceptual framework to underpin the research process.

Miles and Huberman (1994) assert that it is essential for novice researchers to clarify the underpinning theoretical basis of their research study. This involves a clear articulation of the researcher's experiential knowledge of the area of investigation, identifies the existing evidence that informs it (Maxwell 2005) and supports a rationale for the significance of the study (Marshall and Rossman 2006). However, a variety of terminology is evident across the literature, with commentators often using the terms theory, theoretical framework and conceptual framework interchangeably in dialogue that refers to the theoretical basis of research (Connelly 2014). This created a degree of uncertainty for the researcher, which was compounded further by a paucity of evidence to inform the process, in addition to the often complex and inaccessible nature of the evidence that was available. However, this uncertainty was resolved when the researcher uncovered the work of Ravitch and Riggan (2012), which presented a clear and accessible approach to support development of the underpinning theoretical basis of the research study. Denoting the theoretical basis of research as the conceptual framework, Ravitch and Riggan (2012) identify that the researcher is required to address three key elements. These elements comprise personal interest, topical research and the theoretical framework. This straightforward approach was instrumental in guiding the researcher to construct the underpinning conceptual framework of the study. The following discussion considers each of the three key elements in turn in relation to the conceptual framework that underpinned a study to explore individual perceptions of compassion in nursing.

Developing a personal interest

Conceptual frameworks are often driven in the first instance by emerging questions about a specific phenomenon, generating a personal interest in the topic and providing the primary impetus for research (Ravitch and Riggan 2012). In this study, personal interest in compassion was initially influenced by the researcher's role as an Adult Nursing Admissions

Tutor in a Higher Education Institute. The recruitment and selection of candidates to enter this programme was an integral part of this role. As an academic involved in the interview and selection process, the researcher began to reflect upon the reasons why certain candidates were considered appropriate for a career in nursing, and subsequently chosen to embark upon the programme over others. This raised an increasing awareness of the researcher's perception that compassion was an essential aspect of this. This had evolved in response to extensive professional experience as a registrant, personal experiences of care and observations of care delivered to family members. Acknowledging this led to a phase of reflection, during which a range of questions about compassion were considered (Figure 1), supporting an emerging personal interest in compassion as a focus for doctoral research.

Figure 1: Questions about compassion

<p><i>What are the qualities and characteristics of the compassionate nurse?</i></p> <p><i>What specific nursing behaviours do compassionate nurses demonstrate?</i></p> <p><i>What does compassion actually entail?</i></p> <p><i>How can nurses practice with compassion if the concept is not really understood?</i></p> <p><i>What does the individual who has experience of care perceive compassion to involve?</i></p> <p><i>How are these perceptions elicited through individual experiences of nursing care?</i></p>
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This first element of the conceptual framework was an important aspect of supporting the rationale for the study and was undertaken without much difficulty. However, addressing the remaining two key elements presented some challenges for the researcher.

Reviewing topical research

Although an emerging personal interest in compassion was evident, there was limited understanding of compassion from a scholarly perspective. To develop the conceptual framework further it was necessary to undertake a literature review, which Ravitch and

Riggan (2012) refer to as topical research, to establish the existing theoretical conversations that informed compassion. However, as the original tenets of grounded theory advocate entry to the field in a state of 'tabula rasa' (Glaser and Strauss 1967), this presented a challenge in terms of the most appropriate way to approach this. To address this, guidance was sought from the methodological literature.

Although the constructivist grounded theory approach acknowledges that researchers possess prior knowledge and experience, it is important to minimise the potential for this to influence the research findings (Charmaz 2014). Elliot and Higgins (2012) therefore propose that grounded theory researchers conduct a preliminary review of the literature to provide a basic orientation to the area of inquiry. This facilitates a stepped approach, whereby an initial phase literature review contextualises the area of investigation and supports the rationale for research. This is followed up by a focused phase literature review relating to unpredicted, emerging concepts that have arisen from data analysis, which informs the development of the conceptual framework as the research progresses (Urquhart 2013). Delaying the focused phase therefore facilitates emergence of the findings from the data, rather than being influenced by extant literature (Charmaz 2014). A stepped approach to the review of topical research was therefore adopted. The review was undertaken in initial and focused phases and integrated into the conceptual framework periodically, informing the study as it progressed. An initial literature review contextualised compassion in nursing, identified a gap in the literature and supported the rationale for research. As the study progressed, the initial phase literature review was updated to maintain the currency of topical research. Post data collection and analysis, a focused phase literature review was undertaken to specifically explore perceptions of compassion, in addition to a range of unpredicted concepts that had emerged from data analysis.

However, the dynamic nature of implementing this stepped approach raised challenges for the researcher in terms of how to present the literature review within the doctoral thesis. The standard approach to thesis development is often to present the literature review in the early chapters. However, the researcher was aware that this approach may suggest that a comprehensive literature review had been undertaken before data collection and analysis, potentially implying that preconceived ideas may have contaminated data analysis and the resulting findings. In order to avoid this, early thesis drafts positioned the focused phase literature review in a standalone chapter, following the research findings chapter and preceding the discussion and analysis chapter. However, it became evident from feedback that this approach detracted from the flow of the work and also created ambiguity for the reader in terms of differentiating between existing literature and the original research findings. To address this, a decision was taken to revert to the more standard approach, assimilating both the initial and focused phases of the literature review into a single chapter which was positioned earlier in the thesis. To ensure there was no doubt about the approach taken to conduct the review of topical research, a clear account was included at the beginning of the chapter to ensure that readers were fully informed about the stepped approach that had been adopted.

Clarifying the theoretical framework

To complete development of the conceptual framework, it was necessary to acknowledge the formal theoretical perspectives that influenced the researcher's worldview. This is an essential aspect of constructing the conceptual framework, which supports decisions to select a specific research methodology to address the primary research question (Ravitch and Riggan 2012).

Symbolic Interactionism

As the primary research question focused upon individual perceptions of compassion in nursing, it was evident that an interpretivist approach was the most appropriate. Interpretivist approaches to research are founded on the interpretations of individuals to generate knowledge of the social world (Creswell 2013). This approach supports researchers to uncover knowledge which is often tacit, grounded in symbolic meaning and constantly modified by social actors as they interact together (Blaikie 2000). This implies that knowledge is generated by dynamic and evolving social processes, wherein individuals are continuously interacting with one another to create new knowledge and perceptions of the world as they experience it (Jeon 2004). Blumer (1969) refers to this process as symbolic interactionism; a theoretical perspective which focuses on the social aspects of human action, resulting in individual interpretation of the world as a direct result of interactions with other human beings. Through a process of symbolic interaction, individuals constantly analyse the symbolic meaning of the environment around them and the actions of others, resulting in subjective interpretations which support new insights and interpretations (Bryman 2008). This theoretical perspective therefore requires researchers to explore individual and subjective consciousness (May 2011), supporting them to gain understanding of the world, as it is interpreted by individuals as a result of their interactions and encounters with others (Blumer 1969).

In considering the primary research question, it was evident that this study aimed to uncover what compassion involved and explore how individual experiences of nursing care contributed to developing participant perceptions of this. Acknowledging this notion influenced the researcher's worldview, leading to the conclusion that symbolic interactionism

was an appropriate theoretical perspective to inform the conceptual framework. This also became more apparent through data analysis, which revealed that individual perceptions of compassion were strongly influenced by experiences of nursing care and a range of other experiences in the wider social world.

Social Constructionism

A further theoretical perspective which informed and contributed to the development of the conceptual framework related to social constructionism. Social constructionism acknowledges the impact of experience and interactions in the social world and the influence this can have on shaping individual perceptions of a phenomenon (Gergen 1999). Socially constructed knowledge is derived from the conceptualisations and interpretations of individuals in relation to their own experiences and actions, the actions of others and the context or situation in which this occurs (Blaikie 2007). This notion therefore complements the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism and has high utility to interpretive research approaches, which aim to elicit subjective and relativist perceptions to generate new insights and knowledge of a phenomenon (Clarke 2005, Gardner, Fedoruk and McCutcheon 2012).

Humans create and sustain knowledge through the social practices with which they engage. This is founded on the externalisation, objectification and internalisation of phenomena, which is also influenced by history, religion and the prevailing culture (Berger and Luckman 1966, Burr, 1996). Externalisation involves sharing ideas with others, objectification relates to how these ideas subsequently become an object of the inner consciousness and internalisation relates to how this idea is then perceived and accepted by future generations as reality, due to the fact that the idea already exists. In terms of compassion in nursing, this

theoretical perspective led the researcher to conclude that compassion in the United Kingdom (UK) had originally been externalised through Christian scripture, subsequently objectified and translated into professional nursing practice by Florence Nightingale and thereafter, internalised and perceived by society as a core component of the nursing role (Straughair 2012). The initial phase of the literature review to contextualise compassion reflected this, identifying that history and religion had influenced society's perceptions that compassion was an integral philosophy of nursing. Moreover, the political and professional literature to reaffirm compassion provided further evidence, suggesting that compassion had been internalised as a core philosophy of nursing within the realms of the prevailing contemporary UK culture.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

The theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism guided the implementation of a constructivist grounded theory methodology. This methodological approach acknowledged the researcher's existing prior knowledge and understanding (Hunter et al 2011) of compassion, gained through extensive personal and professional experiences which were instrumental in supporting interpretive understanding of the rich data collected throughout the study. The constructivist approach facilitated the development of a mutual understanding of the phenomenon of compassion, via a collaborative relationship between researcher and participant (Charmaz 2014). This resulted in the construction of a theory that was grounded in the participant's experiences (Mills, Bonner and Francis 2006, Mills et al 2007). The constructivist approach assumed a relativist ontology to acknowledge multiple realities and a subjectivist epistemology to support the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). It provided a platform from which the researcher could develop an understanding of compassion in nursing, offering a subjective and interpretative view of the social world, not an exact replication of it (Charmaz

2014). This ideology reflected the theoretical tenets of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, whilst also representing the researcher's personal worldview of the most appropriate approach to explore the research question, and thus, uncover multiple realities of compassion in nursing. This was evident in the study through the complex and multiple realities of individual perceptions of compassion in nursing that were uncovered, and the diverse experiences that were drawn upon to represent this.

CONCLUSION

The conceptual framework is often regarded as an integral aspect of qualitative research, providing a structured approach to enhance rigour, credibility and trustworthiness (Ravitch and Riggan 2012). When researchers are seeking to develop a conceptual framework, it is important to acknowledge that this may not always be a linear process. In this study, the conceptual framework was developed incrementally, emerging through a dynamic and iterative approach which evolved as the study progressed. The evolving nature of the conceptual framework is accepted as an approach which informs, and is informed by, the research process (Maxwell 2012). In this study, this ensued in response to insights from data analysis, the initial and focused phases of the topical literature review and a developing understanding of the relevance of the theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism to compassion in nursing. In its completed form, the conceptual framework proved to be integral to this study, providing a robust structure to support all aspects of the research process and a platform from which to make sense of the study findings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH PRACTICE

With similarity to the experience of the researcher, other researchers may also face a personal challenge when seeking to develop a conceptual framework to underpin their research study.

Drawing on the clear and uncomplicated approach provided through the perspective of Ravitch and Riggan (2012) can support the process and minimise this challenge. The discussion presented in this paper offers valuable insight into the development of a conceptual framework to underpin a constructivist grounded theory study of compassion on nursing. This can provide novice researchers with some guidance when constructing their own conceptual framework, through the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others.

(2824 words in main text)

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