

Overview

Some beginning remarks

This research text is arranged in three parts, each part has a particular focus and each one contributes sequentially to the research journey as I chose to write it. However this does not mirror my experience of this journey. I began by searching for an appropriate methodology,, once this was achieved I set up the first field work group and began the research inquiry. The issues and themes that emerged from this field work created a context for personal exploration. These exploratory experiences, together with the experiences I carried with me, into the research informed the beginning chapters in Part One, and all the chapters in Part Three. Thus the final phase of this research journey informed the beginning of the research account. I will now provide an overview of each part as I have chosen to write it.

Part One

I begin by exploring my own life experiences through memories of critical events. These events are taken from my life as a child, adolescent, nurse and woman. The purpose of telling these stories is to affirm the way life experiences make sense of, and locate the person one is. They also give life to the research journey. Having placed my personal self firmly in the research, I then turn to the issues of nursing and being a nurse, and explore these concepts through my own and others' eyes. To achieve this purpose particular nurse writers are selected for their ability to focus on the relationship between the nurse, and the act of nursing. The intimate relationship between nurses, their patients, and their understanding of caring, are the core ideas in this chapter. However I also explore the way nurses support, or don't support, each other in practice, and the use of group work to achieve this.

The third chapter takes a different stance and explores qualitative research methods. The aim of this chapter is to select research methods compatible with the way nurses manage their lives as nurses. To achieve this purpose I explore Naturalistic Inquiry, Co-operative and Collaborative Inquiry, Action Science, the research cycle as a process, and experiential methods. (It is not until later in the field work that I became aware of narrative inquiry and personal experience methods.) At the end of this chapter a summary of the research methods I intended to take into the field work is presented.

In chapter four I describe how I went about bringing together a group of experienced nurses willing to research with me. In doing this I explain the process of recruitment and include some of the comments and questions I received about my research intentions. In outlining how I intended to manage the group , and the research process, I consider suitable research and group management tools, and affirm those applicable to the chosen research methods, and the way I intended to facilitate the group.

Part Two

Part two contains the first and second research cycles. The first cycle is presented from a group development and research process point of view. This involved identifying stages in group development that were compatible with Rowan's research cycle (Rowan and Reason 1984). To achieve this I drew on my understanding of experiential methods (Pfieffer and Jones 1977). This provided the framework that allowed me to facilitate the research cycle and the group process. Each chapter describes a stage of group development and a phase of the research process: 'Joining' and 'being', 'working and 'project', 'knowledge seeking' and 'encounter', 'sense making and 'communication'. A Co-operative inquiry methodology is used to manage and identify the cycles of action and reflection that we, as co-researchers and co-subjects, endeavoured to pursue. The evaluation criteria within this methodology were used as we reflected on the effectiveness of our work within the group.

The issues and themes that emerged from this cycle of research provided the basis for determining individual research intentions for the second cycle. At the conclusion of the first cycle conflict arose about the use of a Co-operative Inquiry methodology and the research tools of reflection in and for action. This was only partially resolved. During the second cycle of research I revisit this issue of unresolved conflict and present my new understanding in story form in part three.

In the second research cycle each participant chose to focus on particular issues within their own work place. In doing this we all developed our own cycles of reflection and action and shared these within the group context. Reflection in and for action became the focus of our attention as we told stories of our experiences. In exploring my own life as a nurse I began to gain some clarity about my own life strategy and my ways of thinking and acting in the world. The sense I made of this second cycle of research is presented from two perspectives. I begin by using Co-operative Inquiry methods to collect and process the data and then develop story telling as representation of personal experience. This second account is presented in part three.

Part Three

In this part of the research journey I explore gendered life strategies, story telling as a methodology for understanding personal experiences, and I revisit the unresolved conflict in the first cycle. This allows me draw the different threads together and highlight the issues and themes that we as a group discovered through listening to the stories our own experiences.

In chapter ten I explore life strategies, interpersonal competence and the part gender seems to play in the way we interact in the world. In doing this I take time to relate my own life path to Belenky et al 's (1986) explanations of how women learn to 'speak' with their own voice, and value their own minds. This is an important event because their understandings of the way women learn to value their own minds, had a powerful effect on my understanding of myself. In chapter eleven I explored story telling as a methodology for understanding personal experiences and revisit the data collected during the second research cycle. This facilitated a re-thinking, and re-writing, of the second cycle through the lens of personal experiences and life strategies. Consequently chapter twelve draws together the ideas, issues and themes, generated in chapter eleven and I explore my own personal experiences share at that time. To achieve this I re-visit the conflict in the first cycle and explore the metaphors nurses use to communicate anxiety and stress. This encouraged me to write about the unresolved conflict from a more liberating perspective. I also explored my experience of a particular 'doctor - nurse' relationship from the perspective of life strategies, gendered roles and Women's ways of knowing.

Chapter thirteen is the final chapter and here I bring together the different strands of activity and experience. To do this I review the research journey as if I travelled on three different pathways. Each pathway reflects a different aspect of the research journey and I have named these pathways, 'constraining', 'constructing', and connecting. To complete the picture I present the research journey as one complete research cycle (Rowan 1981). In doing this I am able to take the final sense making and communication phase into the future.

Finally I draw together all the themes and issues we explored as we experienced and inquired into our roles as nurses. This provided the 'living material ' from which a schema of the dialectics of nursing emerged. I then consider how this schema relates to gendered life strategies and ways of knowing. The final product reflects my understanding of the connections between all these aspects of my research journey.