



Qualitative Research Methodology in Nursing: Constructivism and Structuralism

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Received: 31.21.2019

Accepted: 23.10.2020

Published online: 20.03.2022

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Citation:

Sheikhbahaeddinzadeh E, Ashktorab T. Qualitative research methodology in nursing: Constructivism and structuralism. J Qual Res Health Sci. 2022; 11(1):27-34.

Abstract

Introduction: As searching and perceiving various aspects of human being are impossible by quantitative methods, it is important to use qualitative methods for disciplines that study human phenomena. Due to the development of the holistic paradigm in nursing, the naturalistic paradigm has received more attention. It emphasizes holism and is based on nursing philosophy such as structuralist and constructivist approaches which are both suitable for solving nursing problems. However, most articles use them interchangeably. This study aimed to explain structuralist and constructivist approaches.

Methods: This review study was conducted via searching certain databases including Google scholar, PubMed, SID, and ScienceDirect using “constructivism”, “structuralism”, “constructionism”, and “nursing” as keywords both in Persian and English in combination and separately, among published articles. The articles explaining the two approaches were studied.

Results: Both constructivism and structuralism are qualitative methods. The structuralist approach makes sense of the background structures of patients. It replaces subjects with anonymous entities, irrespective of time. Constructivism helps to find out socio-economic and political factors of a social problem, emphasizing a construct formed in the observer's mind. Both approaches are holistic and provide deeper understanding. They are used in most articles interchangeably, though.

Conclusion: Constructivism and structuralism, as approaches of naturalism, result in grasping human reaction, motivation, and feelings. They are appropriate approaches to unveil complex problems of health in nursing and detect the structures behind social realities. However, they are different in some respects such as the school of thought, the role of the researcher, and the purpose of data analysis.

Keywords: Constructivism, Nursing methodology research, Natural science disciplines

Introduction

Each research should have a clear and systematic approach to obtain suitable results (1). In qualitative research with an inductive nature, the researcher generally searches for the meaning of a situation (2). It is possible to thoroughly describe, explain, and investigate the phenomenon of a study (1). Various

methods can be employed to uncover the meaning each with unique characteristics (3). The methodology of research is selected based on the phenomenon under study and research questions (4). Qualitative methods can effectively and precisely address real experiences because they are

conducted in a natural field (5). Qualitative researches are related to approaches of interpretivism and naturalism for subjective issues (3). In other words, they are classified as social science researches that collect and analyze non-numerical data (4), focus on words more than numbers (6), and seek semantic interpretation of data (4). Accordingly, the world is observed in its natural occurrence and situations are interpreted with the perception of meaning in real life (6). Social life is understood via studying the target population (4).

Each qualitative method has a specific philosophical perspective which influences questions, observations, and interpretation of data. As research methods are based on a philosophical perspective, understanding the philosophy of qualitative studies is as important as studying a framework in quantitative approach (3). A qualitative methodology is based on the philosophical school of constructivism (7). The constructivist paradigm - called interpretivism and naturalism (3, 7) aims to explain complexities of human aspects (8). It is used more in nursing studies than in the positivist paradigm (3).

The structuralist paradigm emphasizes the set of relationships between the components of the structure of each phenomenon. Understanding these intra-structural relationships of a phenomenon is essential. The main task of structuralism is to discover how people perceive the world, not how the world is (9).

Constructivist and structuralist approaches are suitable when rich and deep information about a phenomenon is required (10, 11). As nursing deals with humans as a complex biological phenomenon (12), these approaches are appropriate ones. On the other hand, according to a proposition of qualitative research, fact is dynamic. Accordingly, Searching and perceiving human aspects are impossible by quantitative research (3). Therefore, for discovering and comprehending complex and multifaceted human issues, these two approaches are required (13).

Constructivist and structuralist approaches are distinct, with similarities and differences; however, in most studies, they are applied interchangeably. The present study attempted to explain constructivism and structuralism together with their limitations and advantages.

Methods

This is a review study carried out by searching in certain databases including Google Scholar, PubMed, SID, and ScienceDirect using "Constructivism",

"Structuralism", "Constructionism", and "Nursing" as keywords both in Persian and English, in combination or separately, irrespective of the date of publication of the articles. Documentary method was applied in this study using note-taking technique for collecting the necessary data to analyze the information through discovering, comparing, and inferring. The articles explaining these two approaches or being based on them were reviewed and their features, similarities, and contradictions were compared

Results

What is constructivism?

The constructivist paradigm was introduced by Weber and Kant (3). According to constructivism, everything that is implicated in human mind is human knowledge (14). Therefore, acquiring knowledge has an individual aspect i.e., each individual acquires knowledge individually, and makes his own special knowledge in his mind (14-16). In this perspective, observation is neither pure nor free from the values of individuals and it should address people's emphatic aspect (7). As a result, various interpretations about reality are formed in people's minds. There has been no yardstick to differentiate the truth and falsity of the constructs (3). Human knowledge is created by itself (7).

Constructivism believes that reality is not a unique and fixed issue but is created by mind (3). In this view, one important issue is the context of the occurrence of a phenomenon (7). The essence of knowledge is related to a situation and related to values. It depends on the context (10, 17). Man's behavior and experiences are formed in context i.e., if events were separated from the background, they would not make sense. This separation is called "ignorance" which is a main scientific aspect (7). For this reason, the essence of knowledge cannot be transmitted from one person to another, but it should be acquired by searching and seeking. Thus, individuals might develop similar or non-identical forms of knowledge (14, 15). Moreover, constructivism believes mankind cannot learn a new and unknown concept unless it is reconstructed with previous knowledge in the mind and the result of real experiences (16, 18). Due to the dynamism of reality, qualitative and naturalist researchers consider it specific and relative (3).

Constructionism dismisses both objective and subjective views because it believes that meaning is constructed not discovered and meaning is not demonstrated as stated in the objectivist view. In constructivism, the observer has an "active" role in creation of meaning (10). In fact, the close

interaction between the observer and the subject observed forms the meaning. The researcher (observer) "herself" is the tool for recognizing the world (10, 13). True knowledge is acquired through immersion and long-term dialogue in a social environment (10, 17). Naturalists believe that the shorter the distance between the researcher and the participant, the greater the knowledge will be (3). The holistic framework is used as a tool for discovering the depth and intrinsic complexity of a phenomenon. In this respect, in qualitative research, a systematic method of studying is conducted to understand the human being, as well as his interactions beyond and within himself (3).

Epistemology of Constructivism

Knowledge does not come from external reality, or its reasons; in fact, knowledge is the achievement of those who convey meaning from their encounter with the material world and others. This process can be considered both a "social" and an "individual" activity. On the other hand, the meanings of objects result from involving an observer with them (4, 19). The constructivists are opposed to the "epistemology of phenomenology," which regards reality as independent and free from values (7).

Constructivism has different branches and perspectives, but what links all these views is that "learning" is a proactive and specific process for each person's mind and this process includes the creation of subjective relations between concepts and images, and information and experiences of the real world outside of the mind. Knowledge about one thing cannot be obtained without prior information which is termed "the subjective background" (10). Constructivism has two general branches. First, cognitive constructivism refers to cognitive processes implying that what we experience is only obtained from the world. We can live in it in the form of a variety of experiences, such as one's own experiences, those of others, and object experiences. All kinds of experiences are necessarily subjective; hence, it is impossible to prove that one's experience is different from that of the others. Radical constructivism, a modern approach of constructivism, emphasizes socioeconomic and political-structural factors, and focuses on the structural empowerment of groups and societies in terms of social intervention (10-14, 20). This is a holistic view. This perspective of constructivism actually combines a symbolic interaction with a political/ socio-economic approach. Constructivism believes that a social issue cannot be considered without regard to the effects of the social classification system and the role of

professions, institutions, governments, leaders, media, patients, the general public, and families. Thus, merely social and cultural effects are considered. In fact, it deals with social causation and social construction (10-14, 20).

Second, social constructivism refers to the subjective knowledge which has a social nature. Social constructivism was proposed by Spector and Kitsuse in their book entitled "Constructing social problems" (21). Social constructivism can be considered a more sociological and centralized version of the paradigm of "cultural meanings" of anthropology (10, 13). According to Spector and Kitsuse, constructivists focus on a process in which people regard social conditions as social issues (11, 12). In other words, the social constructivist approach takes into account the process in which the condition or social situation seems problematic (13).

Social constructivism is based on the basic assumption that the process of definition and the natural history of a social problem are more important than the actual condition of the problem (20). Therefore, litigation and the process of defining social problems are of paramount importance, and litigants, proprietors of disputes, and petitioners are the main causes of social issues construct. Loseke referred to the process as "Social Challenges game". The process does not only include "conditions" but also "people" and "solutions" related to issues. The game of social issues focuses on ethnocultural research, cultural meanings, and the process of social definition. It emphasizes community-centered interventions (13). Brown stated that "Traditional social constructivism does not address causality". It assumes that there is no social problem and social causation is irrelevant, but Brown believed that if medical sociology denies social causality, it won't be explanatory (13).

Consequently, this paradigm for adding social causation to conventional constructivism introduces different structural factors to the "Social Game". This approach also considers the ideological dimensions of the process of definition and practice (for example, who or what group benefits) at different minimum, middle, and maximum levels (20). In other words, there is the basic question of what should be done to solve the problem and who is suitable for the presentation and implementation of the solution. Constructivism tries to persuade audiences with the logic and rationality of the problem, and is also working on their feelings about claims as well as solutions. These three categories are not independent, but they fully interact with each other (20).

Methodological Principles of constructivism

Constructivist considers social reality as multiplicative, spontaneous, and local phenomena (10). In other words, social reality is meaningful, emergent, participatory, and symbolic (13). Constructivism leads to a deep understanding of action, motivation, and human feelings. Knowledge of social reality arises from the interdependence of the scholar and the subject of research (10). "Social construction" is the result of an individual's interaction with his environment and the social environment plays a key role in the evolution of knowledge (12).

In nursing research, language and symbolic body language are valuable because they make it possible to understand the responses of individuals and help to clarify the meaning assumed by people who have experienced social or situational reality. In constructivism, humans are responsible for preserving or transforming the context where they live. Because of the continuity of human communication which is between patients and the nursing staff in the interactive care process, the framework of constructivist theory used in nursing research is often a symbolic interaction. Charmaz considered human beings as active agents in their lives and surroundings. He did not consider them passive to the social forces that surround them (15, 22). Strauss presented the percept of human activity, the emergence of processes, social and subjective meanings, techniques and problem-solving, and the complete study of action. From the point of view of symbolic interactionism, the community sees the truth and individuals as they are formed through interaction; therefore, interactionism takes into account language and communication. Interaction is principally dynamic and interpretive, and explains how people make or change meaning. Constructivism, from a symbolic interactive perspective, provides an interpretive picture of the world under study (13, 22).

Spector and Kitsuse put four basic steps for social construction (social definition) or (in the words of Lasky) social issues game:

1. Groups or individuals (litigants) try to emphasize certain conditions as problematic by calling certain conditions unpleasant, bad, dangerous, and so on, let people know, discuss issues and challenges, and ultimately define a social or political issue (19) such as the stigma of AIDS. While AIDS in medical point of view is a chronic fatal illness, as a social construct, it is a "social stigma". It means that the person with AIDS, in addition to the pain and suffering of the

disease, suffers from the community and feels rejection, discrimination, humiliation, and so on (13).

2. Official organizations or institutions approve groups.

3. The original groups of the lawsuit or other groups complain. They are not satisfied with the efforts made, bureaucratic management of affairs of the complainants, failure to create a condition of trust and confidence, and lack of empathy for complainants.

4. There is neither adequate response to complainants' requests, nor any activity for creating substitutive, parallel, or opposing institutions in response to the established flow of problem management or problematic situations (13). This approach focuses on the subjective meanings associated with the issue created in the context of specific cultural conditions, and a qualitative approach emphasizes on culture, meanings and cultural symbols, the rules of creating culture, the meaning system, and subculture which are formed in different societies and provide the necessary background for the actions of individuals. In this approach, individual and group identities are considered social structures in which individuals' behaviors develop through collective social definition processes and social life. According to this approach, illnesses have a cultural meaning that is not shaped by the nature of the disease, but by how the community responds to it. Diseases are constructed by community and medical knowledge is constructed by claimants and stakeholders. To sum up, social issues are part of a collective meaning process that specifically undergo five stages: 1. the emergence of the problem, 2. the approval of the problem, 3. mobilization of forces to act against the problem, 4. transformation of a plan into practical intervention, and 5. designing a formal plan of interaction in discussions.

These steps are interdependent and cyclic because social issues are not formed in a specific and linear manner. The cyclic model of problem needs an analytical and exploratory framework to discover different values that exist in the definition process (20).

Lasky believed that fundamental questions in the socialist constructivist paradigm consist of five axes:

1. Who: Who are the complainants? Who are the opponents of lawsuit? Who is the audience of claims (as in people with HIV who take social stigma)?

2. What: What do they ask about situations, people, and solutions? In what framework are the characteristics of social issues defined?
3. When and where: When, where, and in what socio-historical context are the protests expressed?
4. How: How are lawsuits pronounced? What strategies does the group make to claims?
5. Outcome: To what extent has the group been successful in litigation-related purposes? (10, 13)

Research has also been conducted on the appropriateness of employing the theory of constructivism, from the point of view of ethics, in communication therapy of psychiatric nurses who are involved to obtain more information about their clients. All health professionals, especially mental health professionals (due to the nature of the vulnerability of the patient group), have commitment to establish trust with clients.

There is a narrow distance between honest communication and its boundaries. The scope of legitimate conduct on the basis of honesty is very limited and the boundaries of communication are considered with minimal flexibility. Therefore, every health professional is responsible not only for maintaining the therapeutic relationship with trust, confidence, and honest responsibility, but is also responsible for ensuring that the communication boundaries are maintained appropriately. Using the constructivist approach, psychiatric nurses establish a therapeutic communication process, maintain professional boundaries, and also adopt a valid ethical position (23, 24). Furthermore, active methods of teaching constructivism lead to greater collaboration among students and reduce class management problems, which in turn increase the student's academic motivation (25, 26).

What is Structuralism?

Structuralism is an intellectual method that has been founded by several contemporary French thinkers, including Foucault, Strauss, and Lacan. Structuralism is a prevailing theory in social sciences, inspired by the teachings of Saussure (21, 22). It has been one of the main approaches to linguistic evolution, which resulted in poststructuralism and postmodernism (14, 27, 28).

This important intellectual thought emerged in the domain of philosophy and humanities in the second half of the 20th century and made much influence. For two decades, it had a great deal of credibility among European and American scholars and

academics (8, 17, 18).

The works of Barthes have been leading in this field by studying cultural categories as components of a sign system. Structuralism in cultural studies is a dominant approach. Based on this view, obscure and intangible structures form the main framework of the phenomena of the community. In this methodology, the elements of human culture must be understood through connection with a larger system or structure. It recognizes the structures that underlie what human beings do, think, understand, and feel (18, 25). "Structure" is an interrelated network of items in a system that can have various and novel forms based on substitution, companionship, and sustenance of the integrity of the structure (29).

Structuralism claims that the phenomena of human life are known only through interactions; these relations form the structure and there are uniform rules of abstract culture behind the apparent oscillations of the phenomenon (18). In other words, the structure is composed of components which are affected in their actions by the structure in which they are placed. Components cannot function, have meaning, or formulate independently (10). Structuralism is not a complicated phenomenon. If we look at a house, we will recognize that components are placed together to make a meaningful integrity called house. Rooms, decoration, and color are arranged in different ways but what maintains the house is its structure (29). This school of thought emphasizes the effect of unconscious and hidden determinants on human consciousness and action. The human being is known only to be a general structure (10). Words, objects, human beings, groups, and society are all in a structure that plays a role in formulating in an unconscious and involuntary way but their activities are strongly denied. According to the ideas of structuralist thinkers, social and cultural phenomena should not be regarded as physical events, but as mental phenomena and events which have meaning. Consequently, their implications must be at the center of research (27, 28). Structuralism teaches to look for the deep structure of cultural background and communication systems such as language and symbols. Structuralism introduces a new view on humans (29). Structuralism is proposed for analyzing cultural and social phenomena and examining the internal and superficial differences between the various types of phenomena that lead to differences in aspects of cultural meanings (10). It investigates systems or

structures associated with the function of that phenomenon in each culture and the relation between the phenomenon and culture (19). Structuralism can be used in psychiatric nursing based on which culture determines how to define mental health and mental illness. Cultural misunderstandings between nurse and patient may seriously affect therapeutic communication and nursing competence (30). Some structuralists have defined the structure as the real issue while others have defined it as an abstract and subjective concept (19). The purpose of the structuralist analysis is to discover the deep structures which give order and coherence to the world (10).

The most important assumption of structuralism is the existence of rules governing events, the ability of humans to find rules, the invariant structures, the increasing complexity of structures, the necessity of structural separation, attention to the level of analysis, and the point that whole is bigger than the set of components (10).

Structuralism believes that without structure, everything will be lost. The foundation of everything is based on its construction, as it is not based on the components modified according to the rules of construction. Nevertheless, structuralism, as a method, allows us to categorize the unlimited facts as in Gestalt psychology emphasizing that there is no perception on multiple and distinct components but the mind is always classifying categories to perceive and avoid disturbances (10, 19).

According to Cohenn, paradigms form a coherent whole with the relations which exist between their components. Saussure called it the self-referential system of the language. Structuralism, as

a paradigmatic approach, provides a holistic perspective for framing scientific theories. It has its own specific assumptions and concepts, establishing various theories from different scientific disciplines (10, 18, 19). In structuralism, the components that are matched with an integrated organization are characterized and then placed in a network in relationship with each other. "These relationships form the basis of the cultural phenomenon under discussion. By discovering this structure, all the activities of the research field can be described accordingly" (25, 27).

Table 1 shows some similarities and differences between the two approaches. However, some articles such as those by Emami et al. (7), Jahani et al. (26), Tajik (31), and Mohsenpour (32) have used these two approaches interchangeably or explained or translated them incorrectly. Structuralism emphasizes inactivity of the agent but constructivism emphasizes agent's active role in the reconstruction of the existing structures. The agent who is alert, active, and constructive is able to change his/her situation (29). It is believed that the structuralist approach, with too much emphasis on structures and depth, may neglect the appearance and the importance of events that take place at the superstructure, hence leading to reduction and simplification (10, 27).

Conclusion

There has been increasing attention to holistic paradigms in nursing profession. Constructivist and structuralist paradigms not only consider holism but also are based on nursing philosophy.

In this study, both constructivist and structuralist approaches have holistic perspectives and result in

Table 1. Comparison of characteristics of constructivism and structuralism

Subject	Constructivism	Structuralism
Perspective	Holism	Holism
Role of researcher	Immersion in research, Research tool, Compilation of actors' interpretation	Discovering and observing the structure behind social reality
School of thought	It emphasizes a construct formed in the observer's mind	It emphasizes the effect of unconscious and hidden determinants, act, and pattern formed
Association between researcher and subjects	Sympathy, Direct	The subject is replaced with anonymous structures
Data Collection Technique	Participatory observe-Field reporting-Interview	Participatory observe-Field reporting-Interview
Image of social reality	As a process created by the agent	Defining the constructive structures
Nature of data	Qualitative -Deep	Qualitative -Deep
Purpose of data analysis	Extraction of theme rules for presentation of theory	Discovering deep structures of cultural and social phenomena
Research plan	It is emerged by researching	Ignoring date and time
Limit-Sample	Optional-Selective-Targeted	Optional-Selective-Targeted

obtaining deeper information, but there are some differences between them in terms of objective, analysis, subject, and research plan. Obviously, an appropriate methodology meets confirmability and dependability requirements for a qualitative study. Hence, it is recommended to appropriately adopt these two approaches in researches.

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Acknowledgments

The editorial team of Journal of Qualitative Research in Health Sciences is appreciated for their attention and patient cooperation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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