

The Use Of Theory In Designing A Nursing Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

Background: For researchers, it is crucial to understand how theory is used when undertaking research because this gives an explanation of the flow of the research and facilitates the translation of the research outcomes into practice.

Purpose: The foundation of our article is based on the explanation of how to utilise theory inductively or deductively throughout the journey of undertaking qualitative research.

Discussion: In quantitative research, testing hypotheses theoretically is the main use of theory. Meanwhile, questions of when and how to use a theory could be contention in qualitative research. An ongoing debate on the interrelationship and interdependence between theory and research has caused confusion, especially for novice qualitative researchers.

Conclusion: This article may benefit novice qualitative researchers by providing a kick-start to incorporate theory in their research work.

Keywords: deductive; inductive; qualitative research; research personnel; theory.

1. Introduction

Different philosophical stances led nursing researchers to adopt various ways of utilizing theory in their research work. Quantitative researchers employing deductive reasoning utilize theory from the beginning to test hypotheses (Borgstede & Scholz 2021). In contrast, inductive reasoning in qualitative research argues that preconceived theory is unnecessary, as it will be formed later through data generation

and analysis (Bingham & Witkowski 2022). However, undoubtedly, there is an interrelation and interdependence between theory and research (Fawcett 1978). Little concurrence has been reached on how theory can be most appropriately applied in qualitative research, while we only have a limited understanding of theory in these types of studies (Sandelowski, 1993; Wu & Volker, 2009; Tavallaei & Abu Talib, 2010; Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Thus, particularly among novice researchers, uncertainty and disagreement exist regarding when and how theory should be used in qualitative research, and even whether to use it at all.

Mourad (1997) and Thomas (1997) contended that using theory in research limits rather than promotes creativity. In contrast, this idea was rejected by Sandelowski (1993), Mason (2002), and Blaikie and Priest (2019), who emphasised the value of theory as a tool to facilitate research processes and argued that no qualitative research could commence without a theoretical foundation. When beginning a study, a quantitative researcher formulates theoretical hypotheses by deducing them logically, based on the variety of theories that have already been applied (Khalid et al 2012). Conversely, a qualitative researcher tends not to outline the theory they employ because the rules governing theory use are not uniform (Anfara & Mertz 2015). In qualitative research, according to Tavallaei and Abu Talib (2010), theory is frequently equated to paradigms of methodology and foundational epistemologies rather than the various roles played by theories in these types of studies. In addition, qualitative researchers do not articulate that using theory in qualitative research renders it an incoherent endeavor (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014). An effective researcher needs to present the theory explicitly and in isolation from the research to avoid taking “excursions into the trivial” (Fawcett, 1978, p. 49). An ongoing debate on the interrelationship and interdependence between theory and research also causes confusion, especially for a novice qualitative researcher. Therefore, this article will be explained on how to utilise theory inductively and deductively when the researcher conducts qualitative research.

1.1 Definition of theory

A novice researcher may become perplexed by the following terms: theory, theory of method, conceptual framework, and theoretical framework. Therefore, one needs to understand

and distinguish the roles involving the terms in a research process. Theory refers to logically consistent ideas about the relationships between empirical phenomena and permits these ideas to be tested using observations. Connections within social systems can be understood, analysed and investigated by using theory as the conceptual foundation for designing ways to do so (Grant & Osanloo 2014).

For example, to understand human social behaviour, Theory of Planned Behaviour by Ajzen (1991) is used to predict and explain individual behavioural intentions. Behavioural intention is influenced by three constructs: subjective norms, attitudes and perceived behavioural control. It may also be affected by the following factors: (i) the beliefs held by an individual about how behaviour could benefit them and their evaluation of the outcome, or behavioural beliefs; (ii) the beliefs held by an individual about other people's expectations, or normative belief, as well as how motivated they are to meet such expectations; and (iii) the feeling an individual has regarding their control over the resources required for a behaviour to be performed, or control beliefs, as well as how strong these beliefs are, or power.

Theory of method provides the appropriate methods to seek the answers to research questions (Collins & Stockton 2018). One example of the theory of method is utilising grounded theory in qualitative research. The grounded theory is a study using a set of inductive methods to conduct qualitative research aimed at theory development (Charmaz, 2014). The term grounded theory represents (a) the method consisting of methodological strategies and (b) the product of the inquiry. Morse (2001) summarized the characteristics of a grounded theory study as a study that concentrates on a process and trajectory, employs gerunds to indicate action and change, and has a central variable or category that connects the stages and phases of the theory. In addition, a grounded theory study uses concepts and relational claims to make the synthesis of descriptive data readily apparent. Therefore, it aimed at constructing middle-level theories from the data analysis. For example, the grounded theory procedure was utilised by Tong et al. (2018) when they constructed a substantive theory that could account for the process used by general practitioners to decide on their participation in research. Their study demonstrates the dynamic interaction between general practitioners' personal factors, social

environment, and organizational factors influence participation in research.

The conceptual framework serves as a “map or track record of the existing literature relating to a study” (Collins & Stockton 2018, p.2). In contrast, the theoretical framework is a “blueprint that guides a research process, representing the researcher’s belief regarding the phenomenon under study, providing insights to support the researcher’s selection of methods, and framing the research questions, data collection, and analysis processes” (Grant & Osanloo 2014, p. 14). In other words, the theoretical framework serves as a platform for how the study will generate new knowledge.

1.2 The dynamic relationship between theory and research

Blaikie and Priest (2019) discussed the interrelated roles between concept, theory, and research strategies and emphasized that it is impossible to avoid dealing with them along a research journey. Furthermore, Stahl and King (2020) stated that relevant concepts, theory, and research strategies make the research findings meaningful, acceptable, and could be transferred to other contexts. Thus, it enhances the rigor of qualitative research.

Researchers need to understand the rationale behind the use of theory in qualitative research. Bradbury-Jones et al. (2014) outlined two potential ways in which theory could be used by qualitative researchers. First, the use of substantiating or disciplined-based theories related to a study topic, for instance, the Theory of Planned Behavior or the Health Belief Model in studying people’s health behavior. These types of substantiate theories enter from the outside and guide researchers to theorize/conceptualize to investigate the problem at hand from the beginning until the end of the research. Second, using theories focusing on the methodological paradigms, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, and others, to develop what is known as a researcher’s “theoretical stances” (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014, p. 139).

Furthermore, Bradbury-Jones et al. (2014) identified five typologies in the use of theory by qualitative researchers. Theory is not present in works at the first level, known as “seemingly absent”. A theoretical perspective is noted in studies at the second level, known as “implied”, but the use of theory is not explicitly statement. In research at the third level, “partially applied”, the theory employed in the work is

identified but it is neither interpreted or related to the context. The theoretical application occurs at the end of studies at the fourth level, known as “retrospectively applied”. At the fifth and final level, “consistently applied”, the whole process of the research demonstrates the consistent application of theory, as well as its explicit articulation. The aim of the current article was to explain the consistent application of theory, which corresponds to the fifth level of the Bradbury-Jones typology.

1.3 The role of theory in the journey of conducting qualitative research

Research journeys normally start with problem statements that describe the problem that the study aims to investigate. Having identified knowledge gaps or problems, the issues related to the problem statement are addressed by developing research questions. The research question functions to direct researchers toward reaching the purpose of a study. Qualitative researchers aim to examine the meanings and understandings of the subjective experiences that individuals have in their social contexts (Creswell & Poth 2018).

Qualitative research involves four theoretical angles or paradigms of research: positivism, critical theory, post-positivism and constructivism (Guba & Lincoln 1994). The standard definition of a theoretical perspective or research paradigm is the collection of fundamental beliefs representing the way the researcher views and understands the actual nature of the world and people, as well as the potential interactions between them (Guba & Lincoln 1994). The philosophical stance of the researcher affects their conception of the constitution of social reality, as well as the ways they exhibit knowledge and understanding of the social world. Thus, the philosophical stance also guides the researcher in conceptualizing the entire investigation process.

For example, Lee et al. (2012) explored the experience of adherence to the medicine of patients living with hypertension. This study was responding to bridge the research gap in understanding adherence behavior; from the patient’s perspective. Adopting interpretivism’s standpoint allows the researchers to explore patients’ individuals’ subjective meanings, motives, goals, choices, and plans of action in hypertension treatment. To understand this, the researchers constructed models by identifying the patient's needs. The data were collected from a purposeful sample of patients, non-participation observation, and reflective writing.

1.3.1 Constructing problem statement

Constructing the problem statement is the first use of theory in a qualitative study. It should also be supported by evidence that the problem truly exists. Congruently, some researchers rely on theory to explain the problems in their research. For example, Asghari and Arabi (2019) suggest living with incurable diseases may cause psychological disorders due to sense of insecurity and disease-related life changes. The researchers employ the Kubler-Ross's theory to understand what patients experience after being diagnosed with incurable diseases. A lack of understanding of patients' acceptance of illness may result in impaired treatment and deteriorate their quality of life. Using Kubler-Ross's theory, the researchers can understand patients' needs going through the disease process and treatment, so appropriate intervention could be formulated using an evidence-based approach.

Theories act as the tools or mechanisms by which we can recognise the summation of our learning regarding particular phenomena from, first, the extant works and, second, how the existing works have engaged with these phenomena (Van den Hoonard, 1997). Stating that neither the study nor theoretical research have ever been conducted is somewhat naive. The problem statement can be enhanced by borrowing theories from separate fields (Blaikie & Priest 2019).

An alternative way to view theory is as a means to offer clues on how a research problem should be addressed based on reflections on social thought from a historical perspective, the initial study and the theoretical development. The researcher can utilize critical thinking models to justify the preferred theory in the problem statement (Vaughn, 2010). The model proposes that the researcher evaluate the quality of each theory by looking at its consistency, testability, prediction, scope, and simplicity. The chosen theory should be internally consistent, for example, it should be free from any dispute regarding its content and structure. Similarly, the theory should also be externally consistent, for example, it should be compatible and consistent with the data that explains the theory. The chosen theory should also be testable because it enables the researcher to test it based on the chosen phenomena. A good theory can assist the researcher in providing strong predictions on the findings. Hence, the researcher can assess a field or area in-depth.

Furthermore, researchers can use theory as scaffolding to interpret a complicated research problem, whereby it can be divided into its principal elements to ascertain their connections and delineate a narrower problem that is more practical to research (Kezar, 2006). Theories can explain phenomena, draw connections, and make predictions (Vinz, 2022). Therefore, in a problem statement, the researcher can justify theory gaps to support the current study and show that the researcher's work is grounded in well-established ideas. It will cause readers to be aware of the assumption of each approach and shows the rationale of the study. The researcher can draw the connection between the key components in theory and relate it with the current gap to demonstrate the rationale of the current study. With a clear explanation of the problem statement, the researcher could formulate a good research question.

1.3.2 Developing the research question

A useful strategy to kick-start the research is converting the chosen topic into a question. This question can instigate the inquisitive mind of the researcher and can also be used as an instrument to assess the comprehensiveness of the literature search by the researcher. Starting with a topic, researchers establish a situation that concerns them and translate the concern into a research question, which at this stage can be very broad and unfocused. The researcher can use the existing theory and relate it with the phenomenon of interest and why the phenomenon is occurring. Bhattacharjee (2012) describes theories as "explanations of a natural or social behavior, event, or phenomenon" (p. 25).

For example, a study by Wen et al. (2020) explores the factors influencing women who undergo caesarean to breastfeed using the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Caesarean section concerns them as the number of women giving birth this way increases. Lower breastfeeding rates were reported, as demonstrated by breastfeeding and breastfeeding practices being initiated early. This may increase the health risk to the mother and infant. The researchers employ the Theory of Planned Behaviour as women's intention to breastfeed is the premise for initiating and continuing breastfeeding practice. Thus, the constructs of the Theory of Planned Behaviour were used to develop an interview guide. With the female participants, the benefits and drawbacks of breastfeeding and formula feeding were discussed (attitudes towards a

behaviour), as were aspects that made breastfeeding easier or more difficult after a caesarean (perceived behavioural control). Next, to explore the influence of subjective norms, the women were asked, "Who or what do play important roles in breastfeeding" (injunctive norms) and "Who influenced your idea of breastfeeding, and in what way" (descriptive norms). As a result, employing the Theory of Planned Behaviour allows researchers to understand women's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour that may influence their decision-making regarding breastfeeding a baby after caesarean delivery.

A conceptual framework, according to Maxwell (2020), is a provisional theory concerning the phenomenon involved that would guide the researcher to develop the design of the study. Besides, the use of theory facilitates the development of research goals, research questions, and methodological choices, eventually leading to relevant findings. It shows that both theory and data are important components of research.

Theory plays a key part in directing researchers from overall theoretical concepts about particular subjects to the topics on which to focus and the types of questions to ask so that research questions can be formulated (Collins & Stockton 2018). Additionally, the researcher can also use theory as a platform to challenge existing theories in terms of thinking and practicing (Price et al., 2015). Mason (2002) reported that theory could provide researchers with a context of ideas or a theoretical framework that will allow them to find a focus to form research questions to address the theoretical contributions of their work.

1.3.3 Reviewing existing literature

A researcher will embark on reviewing literature based on the research questions that have been set. Therefore, identifying the theoretical framework of a study is unavoidable. Kezar (2006, p. 290) explained that "theoretical framework is bringing together different sets of concepts or theories to a study a phenomenon." No testing has been conducted on the associations between concepts, so no theory has been devised yet but steps have been taken towards constructing one. Not only could the researchers design their research using existing theory, but they could also generate new theories from the literature review. Therefore, a researcher should systematically search for theoretical and empirical interest in the literature and identify gaps for the empirical study. Certain questions should be asked in the literature search: What is

known about this area? What methods have been used? Are there any suggestions for future studies to be conducted in the nursing field? According to Silverman (2019), existing literature can provide the researcher with a direction for theoretical sampling to give an idea about where the researcher should uncover the phenomenon that is important towards developing researchers' theory.

Next, searching for relevant literature can help the researcher determine the prominent theories in the nursing area. From another perspective, it also exposes the researcher to diverse theories from various theoretical frameworks of various disciplines. This would enable researchers to improve their capability to engage in effective communication with a more extensive range of academics (Wu & Volker, 2014). Findings from literature reviews will help the researcher develop a conceptual framework to operationalize the theory using appropriate research methods (Meyer & Ward, 2014). Besides, it can help the researcher construct the interview questions (Yedidia 2007), for example, the researcher can construct the research questions using the concepts found in theory itself.

However, this will be different in a study that adopted the classical grounded theory by Glaser. In contrast to the traditional approach in which a literature review leads to a research question, Glaser's approach uses empirical research to reflect the value and limitations of the scientific literature (Deering & Williams 2020).

1.3.4 Identifying and selecting a study method

The theory of method identifies the methods that should be used to answer the research question (Ploeg, 1999). Therefore, a researcher must support his/her stance on a selected method for a research design using the theoretical perspectives that underpin the study. The selected theoretical perspective allows researchers to make a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions. The appearance of the social world, its functioning (ontology assumptions) and our ways to determine our current knowledge (epistemology assumptions) are explained by the theoretical perspective (Crotty 1998; Blaikie & Priest, 2019). The selection of the study design, participants, settings, and sources of data is based on a good understanding of how the study will generate new knowledge in the nursing field.

1.3.5 Collecting and analysing data

Researchers acquiring data in the field usually carry related theoretical baggage, be it in tacit knowledge, ideas, definitions, concepts, or theories (Mason, 2002). However, none of it should serve as a definitive explanation of the phenomenon being researched (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). Data collection is when the researcher moves closer to the social world to discover the commonness of social phenomena; the concepts or theories used need to be sensitized rather than defined to explore the nature of what is common (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). The term “sensitising” here refers to researchers opening themselves to new ideas and interrelating data with theoretical insights. In theory, when researchers maintain preconceived theories, this results in the loss of sensitivity.

Charmaz (2014, p. 161) provided a similar definition of theoretical sensitivity, regarding it as “the ability to understand and define phenomena in abstract terms and demonstrate abstract relationships between studied phenomena.” The sensitizing concept provides the researcher with clues and suggestions on exploring the social world. When researchers begin data collection, they employ various theoretical ideas that are frequently used but indistinct so they can become orientated towards their research problems. Less clear concepts might initially be employed in describing meanings. During the subsequent stages of data collection, concept meanings are sharpened to increase their relevance to the study’s aims (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). The notion of “sensitizing to the theory and concept should be applied in parallel with the data analysis phase to interlink theoretical insight and data” (Bowen, 2006, p. 14). Asking questions and looking for answers via the sensitizing concept process should encourage researchers to produce reinterpretations of data to create the basis of their theoretical notions.

Charmaz (2014) advocated that theoretical sensitivity provides added analytical precision in constructing a theory. The emerging theoretical ideas can then be tested and refined as data collection progresses using analysis through theoretical sampling. Leeming (2018) argued that the position of theory is not always predictable and is heavily reliant on qualitative research. For example, a theory is developed from raw data in qualitative research that uses grounded theory. A substantiated theory serves as a context in which comparisons can be undertaken or as a framework from which to analyse and interpret data (Wu and Volker 2014). Existing theories can

be employed by researchers as part of data interpretation and the creation of novel theoretical proposals that would enable additional researchers to test the hypotheses (Antonovsky, 1979; Andershed & Ternestedt, 1998). In terms of transferability, Meyer and Ward (2014) suggested theorization as the key to transferring findings to a different context.

Multiple theoretical bases can be used for the thematic analysis of the data (Yedidia, 2007). In their study, functionalist, patient-centered, and relationship models were used to understand patients' needs in patient-centered care. The use of multiple theoretical models in this study facilitated the researcher to arrive at a consensus on the scope of the study without neglecting the research participants' needs and values. Furthermore, adopting theory triangulation in this study enabled the researcher to look at different perspectives and come out with rigorous findings.

1.3.6 Interpreting results and discussions

Connecting data to various theory/theoretical ideas will facilitate the researcher to understand the phenomenon under study as they will interact in a dialogic manner. The analytic process requires the researcher to constantly work backward and forward within the entire data set until theoretical saturation is achieved (Saunders et al., 2018). At this stage, employing the triangulation theory stops the researcher from maintaining a focus on the assumptions they initially made and allows them to examine different angles so they can propose original explanations for the topic being studied (Denzin, 1970; Flick, 2007). The dialogue between data and the theoretical ideas can continue until a state of theoretical saturation is reached, where the researcher has conceptualized the phenomenon and found a satisfying answer to the research question.

A phenomenon's meaning is made more explicit and the study's rigour is maintained through theory. Therefore, the outcomes of this type of study are more practical, and academics from other disciplines can understand them more easily (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Nevertheless, the capacity to identify the emergent results from data will be limited if one relies excessively on theory (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Therefore, the findings generated from the raw data will be compared with previous literature. Original knowledge about existing theories will be augmented if a study generates new findings. The application of theory also enhances the

trustworthiness of qualitative research findings due to the role of the researcher as a data instrument (Kornbluh, 2015).

In quantitative research, the theory is used deductively by examining the hypothesis, whereas, in qualitative research, the theory is used to guide the research process and illuminate the study findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reeves et al. (2008) supported this idea that different theories provide different lenses to analyze the research problems rooted in qualitative research. Therefore, the role of theory in qualitative research is not merely to develop knowledge specifically in nursing field but rather to understand a phenomenon of interest from a wider perspective. Figure 1 explained the application of theory in qualitative research journey.

Figure 1. The journey of designing a nursing qualitative research

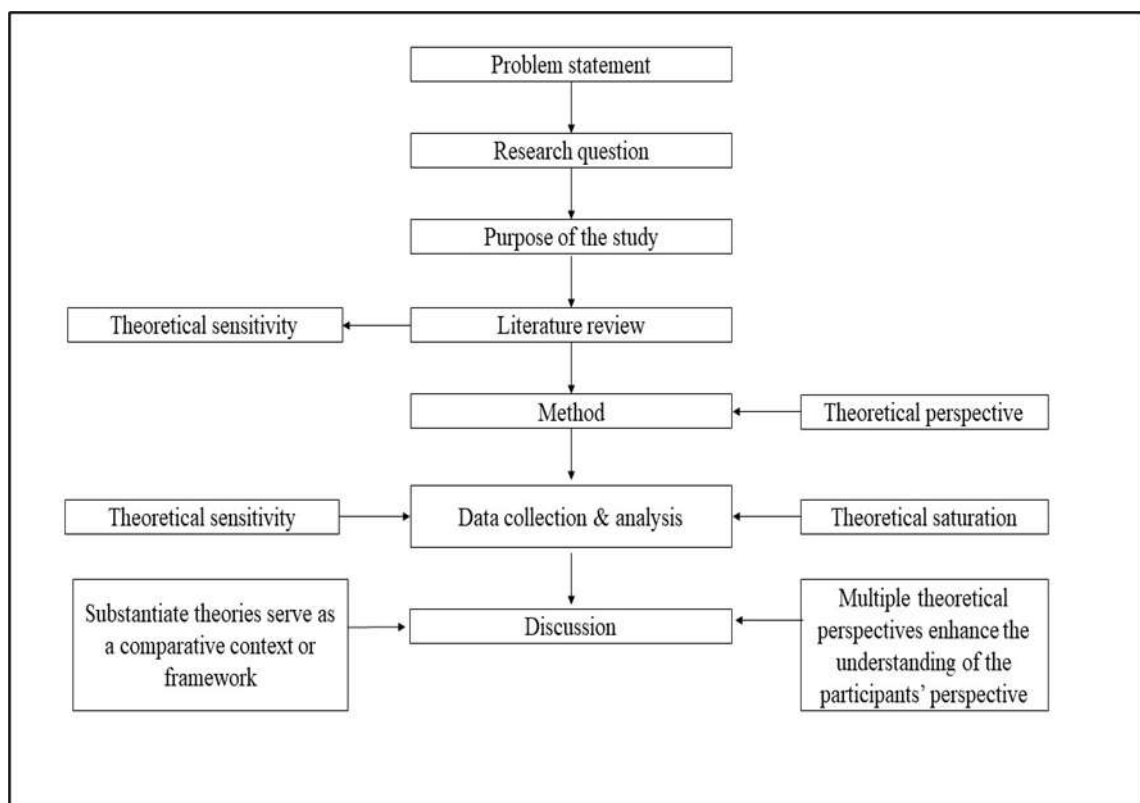


Figure 1. The journey of designing a nursing qualitative research

2. Discussion

Discussion on theory application in qualitative research comprises theory of method, conceptual framework, and theoretical framework that renders theory a valuable tool to ensure coherent qualitative research and robust findings (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Meyer & Ward, 2014; Collins &

Stockton, 2018). Some students might get confused in identifying the suitability of a theory in a study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that researchers need to examine their disciplinary orientation because examining a disciplinary context on the research problem supports using existing theory in that discipline. Although, at this point, students should select relevant theories that provide a sensible explanation to their research questions, this does not mean that one needs to determine some definite theory for their research findings. Rather, it is the theory that guides one in understanding the regularities in social life directly relevant to the research. The theory is about the connection between concepts. Blaikie and Priest (2019) mentioned that the theory might not be explicit at the end of the analysis because it will be reduced to statements between concepts. However, using theory in discussion will help the researcher clarify the findings because it addresses the research questions.

Qualitatively, the theory may appear at the end of the study, where the study generates a theory inductively developed from data collection and analysis. Grounded theory, for example, generates theory from participants' views, placed at the end of the study (Tie et al., 2019). The use of theory helps the researcher reduce the overwhelming number of research findings to key components, which can make complex social realities more comprehensible, for example, in forming a theoretical model or theory as the product of research (Smith, 2012).

Employing numerous theoretical angles leads to useful insights being revealed when researchers can connect data to different opinions that improve participants' understanding (Collins & Stockton, 2018). The generated new theory can be used to challenge existing theories. At this juncture, the researcher rethinks how the contemporarily formed theory could complement or refute the conventional theory according to the present global worldview. Researchers could investigate potential avenues outside the range of a theory, particularly when the theory eventually cannot fit what they observe. At this point, the researcher must adjust, expand, or build an entirely new theory. Any new theory that is devised would likely be specific to a situation, present potential explanations of a phenomenon and assist researchers to undertake preliminary interventions in clinical practice that deserve to be tested further (Chinn & Kramer, 2008). Lastly, researchers need to outline a theory's or theoretical framework's

limitations, following which their research outcomes can be tested in future and the basis of new theories can be formed. The discussion should explore the significance of the results of the study. The following components should be covered in discussion: How do your results relate to the original question or objectives outlined in the background section (what)? Do you provide interpretation scientifically for each of your results or findings presented (why)? Are your results consistent with what other investigators have reported (what else)? Or are there any differences?

3. Conclusion

Research success depends on how clearly a researcher conceptualizes a theory and how well others understand it. Researchers are required to critically analyse well-suited theories for research purposes, questions, methods, and analysis. Despite qualitative research lacking a universally accepted range of methods for the application of theories, it is hoped that the current article presents foundations from which to explore the integration of theories into qualitative research projects, particularly in nursing. To sum up, theories can assist researchers in identifying theoretical and empirical aspects that are missing from the existing literature, justifying the relevance of their work and offering insights that should be explored further to enhance the education and practice of nurses.

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Author contribution

1st author: Writing-original draft and editing

2nd author: Writing-original draft and editing

3rd author: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing-reviewing, and editing

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

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