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Assessing distributed leadership for learning and teaching quality: a multi-institutional study

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INTERPRETATION

Applying heuristic inquiry to nurse migration from the UK to Australia

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Abstract

Background Heuristic inquiry is a research approach that improves understanding of the essence of an experience. This qualitative method relies on researchers' ability to discover and interpret their own experience while exploring those of others.

Aim To present a discussion of heuristic inquiry's methodology and its application to the experience of nurse migration.

Discussion The researcher's commitment to the research is central to heuristic inquiry. It is immersive, reflective, reiterative and a personally-affecting method of gathering knowledge. Researchers are acknowledged as the only people who can validate the findings of the research by exploring their own experiences while also examining those of others with the same experiences to truly understand the phenomena being researched. This paper presents the ways in which the heuristic process guides this discovery in relation to traditional research steps.

Conclusion Heuristic inquiry is an appropriate method for exploring nurses' experiences of migration because nurse researchers can tell their own stories and it brings understanding of themselves and the phenomenon as experienced by others.

Implications for practice Although not a popular method in nursing research, heuristic inquiry offers a depth of exploration and understanding that may not be revealed by other methods.

Keywords

heuristic inquiry, nurse migration, nursing research, phenomenology, qualitative study

Introduction

Leaving one's home country in search of a better or different life is an experience shared by many nurses (Gill and Bialski 2011, Lamont 2012, Pickersgill 2012). Settling and reconnecting with the profession, making friends and trying to feel at home often calls into question the decision to leave, and involves feelings of isolation and loneliness (Melzer 2011, Mapedzahama et al 2012, Ogunsiyi et al 2012), causing the nurse to reflect on why decisions were made and if others who had made similar decisions experienced migration in the same way.

Heuristic inquiry is an approach that encourages self-dialogue to reconcile personal, internal conflicts. It has its origins in the phenomenological tradition, but goes further as the researcher's experiences of the phenomenon are integral to the research.

Kenny (2012) asserted that heuristic inquiry is a qualitative research method that has received little attention in nursing research, but should be used because it enables the

researcher to uncover and acknowledge the researchers' and participants' personal experiences and validate self-knowledge. Heuristic means enabling people to discover or learn something for themselves (Moustakas 1990), and heuristic inquiry demands that researchers explore and analyse their own experiences to better understand the experiences of others. It enables researchers to be spontaneous in creating methods designed to disclose participants' true experiences (Douglass and Moustakas 1985) and to search freely, but also requires they 'follow the path that holds most promise for disclosing the truth' (Douglass and Moustakas 1985).

The study on which this paper is based examined the narratives of registered nurses who had migrated from the UK and spoke about their experiences of leaving the UK and settling in Western Australia.

The assumptions

Heuristic inquiry uses an interpretative process to understand the experiences of

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others and their perceptions in the context in which these experience are couched. This subjective lens allows for different interpretations and understandings, which creates meaning for the researcher and participant (Denzin 2001). Denzin (1989) contended that understanding another's experiences is an activity through which people can characterise themselves in relation to others.

Nurses' experiences of migration from the UK are specific to certain times and places, which brings meaning (Stankiewicz and O'Connor 2014). Moreover, the experience of migration is not one simple, single entity – its meaning changes in context and over time, so must be understood by the researcher in the historical context in which it takes place.

An assumption that is key to heuristic inquiry is the Heideggerian notion that the researcher must guide questioning (Lopez and Willis 2004) to bring meaning to the

phenomenon being studied (Moustakas 1990). Hiles (2001) explicitly acknowledged 'the involvement of the researcher, to the extent that the lived experience of the researcher becomes the main focus of the research'. Crotty (1996) also supported heuristic inquiry's innovation and said it preserved the participant 'as a whole person' rather than dissecting his or her experience during data analysis.

Heuristic inquiry requires researchers to be intricately involved in representing the essence of an experience. It creates a space to uncover the 'self' and validate 'self-knowledge' by providing a canvas for understanding how one knows, but is not always aware of how one knows. Moustakas (1990) asserted that researchers may feel they know something, but may not be aware of how they came to know it. They often cannot consciously express how, as they acquired their knowledge tacitly. Moreover, Moustakas (1990) contended that this 'gut feeling' enables researchers to accurately understand the experiences of others.

For intuition to be effective, skills and practice are required so that researchers can link experiences to understand phenomena (Polanyi 1969). Hiles (2002) contended that while the heuristic approach may be a variation of other qualitative approaches, particularly phenomenological inquiry, the unequivocal involvement of researchers to the extent that their experiences are the focus of their research must be acknowledged. Indeed, the explicit focus of the approach is its transformation of the researcher's experiences (the researcher moves from wanting to know more about the experience to fully understanding it).

Engagement with a phenomenon assists self-discovery by revealing true connections with the participants because preconceptions are not set aside. Casterline (2010) said that heuristic inquiry enables the researcher to fully understand a phenomenon by becoming part of the experience. This leads to the creation of new knowledge by unravelling the unsaid, the unspoken and the mystery of each person's internal frame of reference.

The study

This study had two stages. The first used heuristic concepts that enabled the researcher to engage with the subject matter; the second used specific heuristic phases to explore other nurses' experiences of migration from the UK. Figure 1 shows these stages.

Figure 1. Study method plan

STAGE ONE

Clarify own internal frame of reference

Clarify own internal frame of reference

Identifying the focus of enquiry	Intuition	Self-dialogue	Tacit knowledge	Indwelling	Focusing
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Development of interview schedule

STAGE TWO

Explicate participant's internal frame of reference

The heuristic phases

Initial engagement	Immersion	Incubation	Illumination	Explication
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Creative synthesis

Stage one

This stage provides a template for gathering, analysing and presenting data to ensure the researcher's experiences and the participants' narratives of their experiences are accurately portrayed (Bridgen 2007).

Concepts of heuristic research

Moustakas (1990) identified several core concepts of heuristic research. The first is identifying the focus and forming a research question. In this study the concept involved reading and understanding the migration process from a personal experience to a public experience through the reading of literature about the experience of others.

The second concept, 'self-dialogue', is critical to heuristic inquiry. In the study, the researcher (the lead author) examined not only the component parts of the experience but also the experience as a whole. This enabled the discovery of hidden meanings and unique patterns in narratives.

'Tacit knowing' enables researchers to see the links between concepts and precedes the foundation of intuition, which enables researchers to see patterns and links in what they believed. It is through intuition that we 'perceive something, observe it, and look at it again from clue to clue until we surmise the truth' (Moustakas 1990). Intuitive clues are used to make subtle changes in procedures and directions, resulting in a deeper, more cogent, more accurate representation of a phenomenon than the deductive knowledge obtained through critical analysis of personal experience.

'Indwelling' – or self-awareness of the meaning attributable to an experience – is a cyclical process in which the researcher uses self-dialogue to elucidate self-understanding and to verify major insights. Here, the researcher experiences an 'Aha!' moment, in which the essence of the experience is distilled (Bridgen 2007). In this study, indwelling was slow to develop which was frustrating. However, while it may have appeared on the surface that there was much procrastination, the meanings that lay below the surface gradually became apparent.

'Focusing' results in changed understanding of and clarity about the phenomenon and enables the researcher to remove the 'clutter' of thoughts around the experience to clarify its essence (Moustakas 1990). In this study, it enabled the researcher to recognise qualities of experiences that previously had been unclear because the researcher had not examined her own experience of migration.

Finally, the researcher acknowledged her own beliefs and culture relating to the topic. This is important, as it enabled her to accept that all the participants brought their own sets of experiences or internal frames of reference.

Stage two

Moustakas' (1990) heuristic process provided the framework for collecting and analysing data. The following describes the steps in the study's method and their relationship to these phases (Table 1).

Heuristic phases

Step one – initial engagement

Initial engagement occurred after stage one. Most importantly, initial engagement occurs only once the research questions have been clarified and the phenomena being studied have been understood. The task of recruiting participants who have experienced the phenomena then begins.

Participants and recruitment

A total of 21 nurses were included in the study. They had all been employed in the Western Australia healthcare system for at least six months, were registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, had migrated to Australia and had previously worked as nurses in the UK. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants (Richardson-Tench et al 2011), with 'snowball sampling' providing easy access to eligible participants (Rebar et al 2011).

Ethical issues

Ethical approval was obtained from Edith Cowan University's human research ethics committee. Informed, written consent was obtained from participants before they were interviewed. They were told that the interview

TABLE 1. Heuristic phases and method

Steps	Heuristic phases	Method
One	Initial engagement	Participants. Ethical issues.
Two	Immersion	Data collection.
Three	Incubation	Rest and reflection (in relation to personal frame of reference).
Four	Illumination	Data analysis (individual depiction, composite depiction, exemplary portrait and creative synthesis). Themes emerging.
Five	Explication	Themes confirmed and validated.
Six	Creative synthesis	Early concepts of migration model.

would be stopped if they became distressed (distress was not expected but all risk needs to be acknowledged). Some participants did become emotional when describing their experience. Professional counselling and support were available through the university if required. Participants' responses were anonymised.

Step two – immersion

Immersion marked the start of data collection using semi-structured interviews, the researcher's personal journal and a focus group. Data were collected between 2008 and 2013.

Interviews

Demographic information was gathered from the participants before the interview. The researcher established rapport with each participant by initially recounting instances of her life and own migration to establish common ground. This built empathy between participant and researcher and set the tone for the interview (Crossman 2015). Crossman (2015) warned that the risks involved in self-disclosure would depend on whether the disclosure was intentional or discretionary and whether the participant felt unsafe about the subject matter. However, participants in this study appeared relieved to share their experiences with the researcher.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were transcribed verbatim from a digital recording. The transcriptions were returned to participants for verification. One participant believed there were anomalies in the transcription and requested the audio file, but while expressing surprise at the words used in the recording, made no changes to the transcript and confirmed its authenticity.

The interviews enabled the participants to tell their story without a formal structure dictated by the researcher or an interrogative style of questioning that may have cut responses short (Cormack 2000, Streubert and Carpenter 2011). During the interview, the researcher was central, listening and using tacit knowledge to frame and guide questions.

The interviews gave an insight into the rich tapestries of the participants' lives. It was important to listen well and follow the narratives (Langer and Ribarich 2009). Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached and no new concepts or issues were revealed (Streuhert and Carpenter 2011). Saturation was reached after 21 interviews.

Personal journal

The researcher started to keep a personal journal in the first stage of the study, which provided a positive means for constructing knowledge related to the phenomenon (Sendall and Domocol 2013). Entries were initially focused on the researcher's self-dialogue but changed with the identification of tacit knowledge and intuitive links of abstract thoughts, plus reading and linking of the literature, and listening to own and others stories. Linking all parts of the study together helped make sense of the experiences and the journal maintained a complete 'memory' of the interviews, incorporating vivid descriptions of the context of the interviews.

Focus group

A focus group served to supplement and confirm information gleaned from the interviews. It also provided an opportunity for participants to share their experiences of migration with people who had similar experiences.

The group was held three months after the completion of the final interview. Six of the 21 participants attended – Steubert and Carpenter (2011) stated that six to ten participants is an ideal number for a focus group, as participants feel safe and more willing to share in this environment.

The researcher set up the focus group, with a colleague acting as scribe. The participants verified the validity of the themes found in the individual interviews during the focus group (Polit and Tatano Beck 2014). The researcher's journal findings were confirmed as well. The verbal interactions of the group were digitally recorded and transcribed in seven days.

Steps three and four – incubation and illumination

Incubation and illumination are concurrent and signal the beginning of analysis. They create a conduit between the researchers' reflections on the participants' experiences and their own experiences, uncovering their meanings and essence. Developing connections in and between the data cannot be forced and occurs naturally at a point when the researcher is open to tacit knowledge and intuition (Moustakas 1990).

Step five – explication

Explication involves data analysis. Heuristic analysis comprised individual depiction, composite depiction, exemplary portrait and creative synthesis.

Individual depictions comprised the identification of themes from participants after repeated examination and review of their data. This led to descriptive narratives drawn from each participant's transcripts. These narratives were written as vignettes to capture the story authentically. Individual depictions gave the researcher maximum exposure to the evolving picture.

Composite depiction is a combination of individual experiences woven together as a complete story. While not losing sight of the individual, it requires the researcher's immersion (developing a deep understanding of the data) and incubation (putting self into the experience totally) in the data until all meaning of the experiences in total is explicated. It represents the end product of thematic analysis.

Two analytical techniques were used to formulate the composite depictions that formed the basis of analysis: coding and thematic analysis. Colour coding, recommended by Moustakas (1990), was used to develop a map that depicted connections and relationships in the data. In each case, words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs that stood out were highlighted then coded manually and organised into themes (Braun and Clarke 2006).

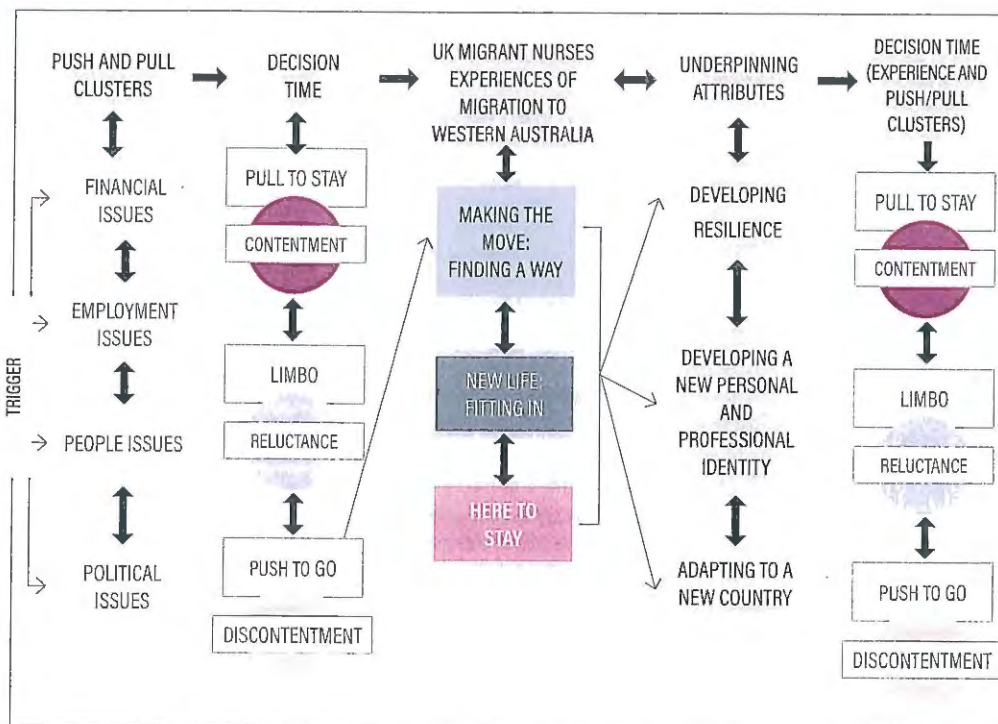
The most important concepts, words and phrases in each transcript were identified.

Once the key content pertaining to each theme became apparent, an umbrella term was used to describe themes. Three core essences were identified and these were verified by participants in the focus group. Data were then considered for analysis in light of the heuristic framework and a composite depiction of the phenomena was developed. Participants in the focus group validated the findings reported in the composite depiction.

An exemplary portrait is one story that contains all the themes or essences particular to the experiences of the group as a whole.

Creative synthesis is the ultimate product of the inquiry and occurs once the researcher fully understands all the components and core themes. It is the summative understanding of the experience as it makes sense to the researcher while capturing the truth of the experience as it occurred to the participants (Moustakas 1990). It is often delivered in the form of a poem, story or painting but can be presented in another creative form (Moustakas 1990) to represent the phenomenon as a total experience. The creative synthesis in this study was represented by a migration model, which provided a unique perspective of migration (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Nurse migration: a model for success



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Conclusion

This paper explains why heuristic inquiry was the methodology chosen for a study of UK nurses' migration to Australia. This method of inquiry is unique as it incorporates the researcher's own experiences of the phenomenon being studied, which are integral to the research. Heuristic inquiry demands

the researcher's absolute commitment to the research as an immersive and personally affecting method of gathering knowledge. In this approach, to truly understand phenomena, only researchers can accurately validate the findings by exploring their own experiences as well as those of the participants.

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