

LITERATURE REVIEW

**INTERPRETIVE DESCRIPTION RESEARCH: A FUTILE OR FERTILE
VALUE ADD TO NURSING SCIENCE**Sajid Iqbal¹, Laila Ladak², Hamid Ali³, Rubina Barollia⁴**ABSTRACT**

The practice of nursing typically adopts qualitative research approaches to inquire the subjective aspects of patients' experiences in a situation. However, based on their origins and methodological processes, the approaches merely bring up thick descriptions to understand the phenomenon understudy without intent of problem solving. There is need of nursing specific research approaches that could tackle the notion of holistic care approach in their ontological, epistemological, and methodological processes. Interpretive description is one such, nursing specific, emerging research approach that attempts to address the stated issue. However, the approach is still not acknowledged in research inquiries by nurse researchers in South Asian countries especially Pakistan. This paper will inform the nurse researchers about the basic tenets of interpretive description with analysis of its implications for nursing science.

Key Words: Interpretive Description, Nursing, Paradigms, Philosophical underpinning, Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

Based on philosophical underpinnings of nursing discipline, nurse researchers mostly seek solutions to clinical problems associated with psychosocial, cultural, spiritual, and contextual aspects that all go simultaneous with physical suffering. As no current research design cover both subjective aspects of human health and solutions to problems associated with such aspects, literature from 1980s and early 1990s shows that nurses were found doing method slurring or showing hollow allegiance between a selected design and the process of their inquiry.¹⁻⁴ Hence, the need of a research approach pertinent to nursing care related inquiries became an attention seeking side of nursing research.

To address the nature of stated clinical problems in nursing discipline, Interpretive Description approach was introduced. There are rich debates (discussed later) about this emerging research approach,⁵ yet a myriad of studies exist across the globe that have utilized it. However, the literature available from Asian region generally and from Pakistan specifically shows scarcity of interpretive description approach being utilized for scientific inquiries. The basic reason for such scarcity is either lack of awareness about this evolving approach or poor understanding of its methods and their implications for nursing science.

It is not unexpected to highlight any areas of improvement or the need for modification in interpretive description approach but that is only possible once nurse researchers will conceptualize and consider the stated approach in their inquiries. However, as discussed by Kahlke (2014), the interpretive description falls in genre of generic qualitative approaches that works outside the conventional methodologies and keep minimum restrictions in adapting various methods.⁵ Therefore, novice researchers should thoroughly conceptualize the mentioned approach and may also seek guidance of experienced researchers to align the nature of inquiry and methods borrowed.

This review paper aims to highlight the main features of interpretive description and to analyze the interpretive description applicability in nursing research. Moreover, the views of both opponents and proponents of this research approach will be discussed. It is anticipated that the paper will update the nursing community to move beyond the extant approaches and conceptualize and acknowledge, through application, the interpretive description as a nursing specific research approach.

Interpretive Description: Basic Tenets

The approach has been presented by Sally Thorne (professor at University of British Columbia, School of nursing) and her two graduate students Sheryl Reimer Kirkham, and Janet MacDonald-Emes in 1997.⁴ The authors have explained interpretive description as a non-categorical qualitative research approach that methodologically addresses the nature of inquiry pertinent to health and the experiences of suffering under the pragmatics of nurse-patient scenarios. Later on, Sally Thorne presented in-depth details of the research approach in her book titled as “Interpretive Description - qualitative research for applied Practice” now available in second edition.⁶ In order to weigh the relevance of interpretive description to inquiries in realm of nursing science, it is important to have insight of basic canons of this approach.

Philosophical Underpinnings

While caring, nurses have an interpersonal relationship with their patients that acknowledges the unique experiences lived by patients as well as the contextual meanings

assigned to such experiences by patients and nurses. Taking all this into consideration, as reflected by its name, interpretive description is underpinned by interpretive constructionist philosophy under the naturalistic paradigm.^{5, 7} Hence, in interpretive description research, knowledge development is not a theoretical piece of information, nor it can be based on objectivity, rather it is socially constructed and empirical to clinical problems’ solving.⁸ The actualization of this philosophical underpinning in research process, though pertinent to philosophy of nursing, has not been restricted to use of frameworks like many other extant approaches.

Study Frameworks

Unlike traditional phenomenological and classical grounded theory approaches, the interpretive description supports the idea of utilizing the existing literature and scholarships through past experiences to build a base for new inquiry.⁴ However, the approach is not bound to fix designated priori framework to fit in the research process, rather molding process is acknowledged to better address the interpretations in a specific scenario.

In interpretive description, the researcher at the outset, formulate a question which is not sufficiently addressed by the available knowledge.⁹ This seems similar to other research designs, however, the question is usually based on a problem from clinical fields in a way that its answer is easily applicable to the problem; for example, an interpretive description study was conducted on preferences of patients regarding physicians’ behaviours while communication about end of life.¹⁰

Sampling

Theoretical sampling technique is used in interpretive description as according to Glaser, (1978) and Sandelowski, (1995) this technique allows, through inductive analysis, inclusion of all possible variations under an emerging theme.¹¹⁻¹² However, considering theoretical saturation as fundamental, Interpretive Description does not restrict the researcher to one specific recruitment techniques. For example, in a narration, Teodoro, et al. (2018) highlight that three interpretive descriptive studies have used intentional sampling, two have used theoretical saturation sampling

while one more has used convenience sampling.⁹

Thorne (2016) considers varied sample sizes subject to the nature of phenomenon of research and the level of existing knowledge on the topic.⁶ However, in majority of interpretive descriptive studies the sample size tends to be small usually ranging from 5 to 30.⁹ The variation in sample size is limitlessly allowed to fully satisfy the nature of inquiry, for example, in a descriptive interpretive study, the sample size was reached to 60 participants.¹³ Hence, the data saturation, to satisfy the depth of emerging themes, is decisive for sample size in interpretive description approach.

Data Collection

Morse views that the only unsurpassed spring of knowledge regarding an experience can be an individual who would have lived that experience.¹⁴ However, Sally and her colleagues assert that the participants' level of expressiveness, thoughtfulness, and willingness are important characteristics to be considered. Thus, purposeful selection of participants will bring both variations and commonalities in resultant data.⁴

The design has not imposed restrictions on approaches for data collection and can include individual interviews, focus group discussions, observation, and document analysis; however, individual interviews have been frequently observed aligned with the purpose of collecting data that are subjectively, contextually, and clinically rooted in an individual experiences.⁹ Thorne (2016) also asserts that triangulation of the methods can increase the credibility of the study.⁶ Similarly, one step as well as two steps individual interviews are also reported in different interpretive descriptive studies.^{9,15}

Analysis

According to Thorne, et al. (1997), interpretive description encourages immersion and feeling of data through reading and rereading before highlighting the significant statements of participants.⁴ Also, prior to examining minutiae, the interpretive description urges to focus on broader or overall scenario.⁴ Analysis of data remains simultaneous with data collection, iteratively, as the analysis process and constant comparison guides the theoretical sampling

and nature of questions for inquiries. The analysis progresses inductively through coding to themes formation. Significantly, nurse researchers develop themes based on commonalities amongst individual cases and construct knowledge that is applicable back on the same or similar individual cases.

Rigor

The authors of interpretive description openly acknowledge the risk of biases, which may not be eliminated in total, particularly in qualitative research conducted in nursing domains.⁴ Authors acknowledge the vitality of journal club and field notes; however, in interpretive description a researcher has not been limited to a specific technique that may preclude full description of the process. Similarly, aligned with view of Sandelowski, taking back the transcripts to individual participant [member check] can lead to contradictions due to changing views and experiences of the participant with time.¹⁶ However, considering the perspective of nursing science, the authors of interpretive description do not ignore subjectivity. As a result, for validation, they suggest at the outset of conceptualization, the views of whole sample can be shared back with individual research participant for critical contemplation instead of taking back an individual's transcript back to him/her.⁴

Implications of Interpretive Description for Nursing Science

Nursing process undertakes the consideration of holistic care that, uniquely, considers aspects beyond physical health. Therefore, in most of the nursing care process, qualitative paradigm best serves the purpose.² The traditional qualitative approaches are grounded in diverse philosophical considerations from varied disciplines for example phenomenology comes from philosophy, grounded theory from sociology, and ethnography has canons from cultural anthropology.^{4,7} In addition to that, none of these designs offers problem solving approach specifically in health-disease scenarios. Therefore, it has also been explained that, nurse researchers at times do not find their inquiries fitting in any of these approaches or they follow a methodology that cannot be named in current realm of qualitative paradigm. Having stated that, it is to internalize that nursing as an applied

science; thus, needs an approach of inquiry that does not only consider the unique experiences and interpretations in interpersonal process of caring but also emphasizes on scientificity and validity of the approach. Thus, interpretive description has been evolved in a much-needed time and context. Although, this approach has been used by researchers in numerous other disciplines, the distinct features of this approach are; philosophical alignment with that of nursing discipline and commitment to problem solving in nursing practice that make it well suited to nursing related inquiries.⁷

The epistemological underpinnings of interpretive description are directly aligned with that of nursing.⁶ The approach gives enough flexibility to researcher to co-construct new knowledge based on the experiences and shared interpretations of nurse and patient under contextual, sociocultural, geopolitical and spiritual worlds of those involved in the inquiry.

Interpretive description is distinct from extant qualitative approaches specifically due to creation of knowledge that is not for the purpose of theory generation or narrative description, rather the created knowledge offers immediate solution to what the participants or others in similar experience are suffering from.⁹ Moreover, the constant comparison allows patients and nurse researchers to co-construct meaning thus adding to the validity and applicability of knowledge to clinical problem-solving process. Based on his practical experience, Hunt (2009) shares the coherence of interpretive description in clinical context and generation of practice related results while being sensitive to discipline associated biases and obligations.²

Arguments and Counter-arguments

Realistically speaking, while reading about interpretive description, in first reading, one senses nothing new than the tenets already used in the extant qualitative research approaches specifically in grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology. But, in-depth conceptualization of interpretive description, through extensive reading, makes it clearly distinct from other approaches. The editorial written by Carina Bertero exactly reflects the point by entitling it as “Developing

qualitative methods - or “same old wine in a new bottle”.¹⁷ Bertero claims that after reading the methodological description and applications of the interpretive description approach, she considers it as part of the Grounded Theory’s movement. However, Matthew R. Hunt shares about his experience of working on a part of PhD dissertation in which he was exploring health care professionals’ moral experience of humanitarian work. He was to use the framework of interpretive phenomenology but with deep analysis of the chosen research framework, Hunt found it as mistitled to the nature of his inquiry. He also considered multiple case study research and grounded theories but, lastly, it was the very interpretive description he found appropriate.² The experience of Hunt reflects the Thorne claim that interpretive description, noticeably, free researchers from methodological orthodoxy and also the applicability of the approach to disciplines beyond nursing, as Hunt’s inquiry included doctors and midwives beside nurses.⁸ Moreover, indeed, interpretive description borrows concepts from other disciplines especially theoretical sampling and constant comparison from grounded theory research. But, in very next step, it gets to a unique tract that encourages broader view of the data rather line by line coding one does in grounded theory.

The mixing up of methods in one research that leads to philosophical incompatibility is referred as method slurring.¹ As the interpretive description borrows cannons from different qualitative research approaches, risk of method slurring becomes a reasonable one. However, Thorne and her colleagues anticipated this risk in their subsequent article published in 2004. To address the risk, they highlighted the unified and predetermined philosophical underpinnings of the proposed approach.⁷ Thus, despite of borrowing methods from other qualitative school of thoughts, the basic philosophy of interpretive naturalistic paradigm decisively guides the conduct of interpretive description and it has unique problem solving approach in qualitative inquiry.

CONCLUSION

Interpretive description is a valued addition to nursing science. This non-categorical

qualitative research approach better addresses the unique nature of issues in nursing and other applied sciences. Besides, taking into considerations the factors pertinent to nursing field, the approach has the distinction of leading to problem solving instead of merely generating new descriptions or theories. Therefore, nurse researchers need to analyze the approach and include their valuable insights either on its applicability or further improvements.

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