

The Role of Research in contemporary everyday nursing and midwifery practice: A reflection

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Introduction

In striving for excellence in care and practice that advance the health and well-being of patients and families, communities and populations, both the professions of Nursing and Midwifery have a rich history of research and scholarship to generate evidence for this purpose.

This is evident from a plethora of research dissemination activities in scholarly and peer-reviewed publications, the number of journals, the research roles nurses and midwives fulfil, their education and practice.

Research; both quantitative or qualitative; can be characterised more generally as a systematic, rigorous, logical and social-interpretative process aimed at finding valid answers to relevant and significant questions within a particular society and community to advance a general good (Grove et al, 2013).

What is the Role of Research?

Traditionally, the role of research in nursing and midwifery has always been understood in functional terms. This implies that the goal of research within the boundaries of the disciplines of nursing and midwifery (including its theory, practice, and philosophical underpinnings), is to generate a body of knowledge and evidence to improve practice and quality nursing and midwifery care for individuals and families, communities and populations (Jirojwong, et al, 2014).

Gains made in research to establish an evidential basis for nursing and midwifery together with its proclaimed “moderate-to-high” use among nurses’ and midwives’ (Squires et al, 2011), coincidentally also contributed to a widening gap between research and everyday practice.

What is the Research Practice Gap?

This is the disproportionate disparity between research evidence and actual practice outcomes. This disparity or gap has been widely discussed, debated and researched in nursing and midwifery and various solutions has been proposed, developed and implemented to address this gap (Fowler Byers & Stullenbarger, 2003).

Yet, it is believed that the research-practice gap continues to widen. More often, questions about the role of research in everyday nursing and midwifery practice are raised from various avenues, e.g. policymakers, the professions itself and the public.

Context, Utilisation and the Role of Research in Nursing and Midwifery Practice

Globally nurses and midwives; as committed and accountable professionals in all context and domains of nursing and midwifery practice, including all levels of decision-making; are encourage to get involve, participate, and collaborate in research.

In considering the role of research in everyday nursing and midwifery practice, including the role nurses and midwives play, one have to remain cognisant of the context in which it occurs.

- The link between society and research as an activity, suggests that socio-political, and economic dynamics in contemporary health and practice environment, not only influence and shape the nature and structure of research (e.g., its purpose and methodology, including its role and feasibility), but in turn, evidence generated through research endeavours informs and provide society with means to advance its goals.
- Within the context of everyday nursing and midwifery practice, environmental and contextual factors, both within and outside nursing and midwifery practices related to the research-practice gap, influence the role of research in everyday nursing and midwifery practice.
- Published research studies identifies "*evidence-based beliefs*" and the complexity of "*evidence-based activities*" as significant predictors or factors influencing nurses' and midwives' readiness and utilisation of research-based evidence to inform their practice decisions (Meijers et al, 2006; Saunders & Vehviläinen-Julkunen, 2016; Thorsteinsson & Sveinsdóttir, 2014).

Evident from research studies, the extent to which nurses and midwives use research evidence in their practice are often reported as "moderate-to-high" (Squires et al, 2011). With the renewed emphasis on research in clinical practice, the role of research in nursing and midwifery shifted from the generation of evidence towards the increasing application of evidence in everyday practice to bring about good care outcomes for individuals, groups and communities.

Nurses and Midwives Participation in Research Activities: What are the Roles that Nurses and Midwives Fulfil?

Considering contextual influences, the role of research in everyday nursing and midwifery practice conceptually is depicted as striding two extreme poles with the role of research consumer on the one end and that of research producer on the other
(Loiselle & Profetto-McGrath, 2011; Jirojwong, et al, 2014)

Producers of Research

In the traditional role, as research producers of new knowledge, nurses and midwives, actively engage in research activities through

- The identification and formulation of research problems in practice,
- Designing, refining and implementing research studies to generate a knowledge-base for practice.
- To a large extent phenomena in the purview of nursing and midwifery are explored, described and interventions are tested and evaluated to determine effect using several research designs, methods and techniques.

The end-product of such endeavours are evident in a body of knowledge covering a wide variety of topics in nursing and midwifery practices, that is captured in a plethora of published literature communicated in many scholarly journals stored in several data-bases.

Nurses and midwives demonstrate an ongoing involvement and participation in scholarly conferences, meetings and professional activities; as well as the variety of research roles they fulfil.

Examples of such role include, as independent researchers, team leaders of disciplinary and interdisciplinary projects; research facilitators, coordinators, nurse scientist, etc. (Brant, 2016; Jirojwong, et al, 2014; Loiselle & Profetto-McGrath, 2011).

Consumers of Research

In the role as "consumers" of research, nurses and midwives as professionals keeping abreast of new developments in their respective areas of everyday practice, read research papers to acquire new and develop existing skills, keeping up-to-date with evidence in their areas of practice, to deliver competent, compassionate, safe, ethical and quality care to patients.

Nurses and midwives increasingly conduct systematic literature reviews, search, retrieve, critically appraise, and synthesise evidence on best-practice interventions within the purview of their responsibilities (e.g., pain management, gentle birth options, end-of-life care; ethics education, etc). These are integrated with patient values and expert judgment by engaging with patients and families, healthcare managers, policy-makers and funders of healthcare, to make better health care decisions and improve quality nursing care, practice and organisational outcomes, as well as highlighting gaps for further research (Hanrahan et al, 2015; Zhou et al., 2015; Alderdice et al, 2013)

In-between the respective roles as producers and consumers of research nurses and midwives take on various roles of research-related activities in everyday practice (Loiselle & Profetto-McGrath, 2011). For example, as field-workers or assistants to nurse and midwife researchers actively involving and participating in the recruitment and selection of research participants and data collection; participate in journal clubs in which groups of nurses in their respective fields of everyday practice regularly meet to discuss and critique research articles; participate in conferences, professional and research meetings; review clinical research proposals and provide expert input to improve aspects of clinical research protocols; participate in clinical research or evidence-based translation workshops in which various stakeholders (e.g., patients and families; nursing students, clinicians, nurse managers, administrators) came together to discuss the implications and relevance of research findings to be translated in a specific health care institution or clinical unit (Jirojwong, et al, 2014).

These aforementioned roles in research in everyday nursing and midwifery practice can accommodate nurses with various levels of skills and expertise and interest. Nurses' and midwives in everyday practice also increasingly becoming involved and lead inter-disciplinary research studies that aligns with their professional values, interest and passions, focusing on social justice and human rights issues in care practices.

Nurses and midwives also extend the boundaries of research into theory-development to contemplate and theorise the ethical and ecological validity of research, that is the extent to which process and outcomes of research are relevant to various contexts, groups or societies (Loiselle & Profetto-McGrath, 2011). To this end, nurses and midwives in research and research-related activities evaluate how systems and social structures shape and influence social justice, human rights, equity, quality and access of care for all.

Conclusion

“If you have an inquiring mind, identify problems in clinical practice and strive to achieve better outcomes, you are conducting research, because you are “re-looking” to bring about changes to the better or your clients and patients”

(Du Plessis, 2015).

To advance on the progress and achievements nurses and midwives has made in the domain of research and scholarship, ongoing education and capacity-building in research is a key consideration (McCance et al, 2007). Education and capacity building among nursing students in undergraduate nursing courses focusing on levelling-approach to develop competencies in research literacy, including the critical reading of research literature, its critical appraisal and synthesis of evidence is important.

Furthermore, this requires of undergraduate students to have a firm grasp of foundational knowledge of research concepts and methods, in relation to disciplinary understandings. At the graduate level, to emphasise knowledge translation and translational research endeavours grounded in in inter-professional, inter-disciplinary understandings and collaborations in research practices.

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