

Interpretive research methodology: Broadening the dialogue

This article expands the dialogue on interpretive research methodology, locating this set of approaches within a broad historical and interdisciplinary context. Several of the most commonly held misconceptions in nursing, particularly those related to the meanings and derivations ascribed to "grounded theory," "symbolic interactionism," and "ethnography," are examined. The interpretive research approaches not only have gained broader acceptance across disciplines, but also have shifted in more radical and often less structured directions during the past decade. Several pivotal areas of these ongoing shifts are analyzed for their relevance to nursing research: the influence of critical and feminist theory and postmodernism, the ambiguity inherent in both everyday life and the research enterprise, the importance of locating the researcher, power and status inequities, the problematic aspects of language, meaning, and representation, and the emphasis on reflexivity and context as constitutive of meaning. Key words: ethnography, interpretive research, qualitative, symbolic interaction

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NURSING HAS experienced a surge of interest in interpretive research. Along with this interest, many questions and controversies have arisen. This article examines interpretive research methodology with the aim of locating this set of approaches within a broad historical and interdisciplinary context. It presents an abbreviated intellectual history of these approaches, focusing primarily on the symbolic interactionist tradition. The article's purpose is to expand the ongoing dialogue on interpretive research in two ways: first, by examining some of the diverse meanings and misperceptions most rampant in the current nursing dialogue, and second, by presenting some of the recent epistemological developments that make this set of approaches even more important for our discipline.

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In nursing, we often disagree on many of the terms and derivative concepts associated with interpretive research approaches. These misconceptions are closely related to confusion about the meaning of qualitative research and the derivations and underlying assumptions of the various qualitative research methods.

Nurse researchers come from diverse backgrounds, which contributes to the lack of shared meanings in their dialogue on these issues. Many early interpretive nurse researchers initially received their doctoral education in sociology, anthropology, or psychology. As these nurses brought different disciplinary perspectives, with their particularistic language and frames of reference, concepts spread with many inconsistencies. Because this interpretive tradition has not been so prominently active as many of the so-called empiricist and postpositivistic research approaches, there has been less dialogue, and thus less consensus, about the constitutive meanings and approaches.

Some of the terms that have been most consistently problematic include "phenomenology," "hermeneutics," "ethnography," "grounded theory," "symbolic interactionism," "ethnomethodology," and even the taken-for-granted term "empirical." By discussing the meanings commonly ascribed to those labels, and then locating them within the broader context of interpretive research, I hope to clarify or at least enlarge the dialogue by raising further issues.

DEFINING THE INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH TRADITION

A brief overview of what is meant by the interpretive research tradition is necessary. The terms most commonly used when referring to methodological approaches within

this tradition are qualitative and inductive research, along with hermeneutics and everyday life perspectives. Basic to all these approaches is the recognition of the interpretive and constitutive cognitive processes inherent in all social life. This extends to all the phenomena we as nurses study, as well as to the research process itself; thus, the interpretive research perspectives recognize the importance of the interpretive processes of the researcher in all research undertakings. Increasingly, the critical role of language as problematic and context as constitutive of meanings has also raised issues in these areas.

Earlier in nursing and the social sciences, approaches tended to be divided by whether the data analyzed in a research project were qualitative or quantitative in nature. However, this distinction easily breaks down, as does the distinction between inductive and deductive research. Increasingly the more precise definitions deriving from philosophy of science are utilized. This divides research at the level of epistemology into three major research traditions: the empiricist and realist tradition, the interpretive tradition, and the critical/feminist tradition.¹

The major divisions within the interpretive tradition

The major divisions within the interpretive or hermeneutic tradition can be categorized in several different ways. Currently nursing separates them into three methodological divisions: phenomenology,²⁻⁶ ethnography,⁷⁻⁹ and grounded theory.¹⁰⁻¹⁵ Although more sophisticated work is beginning to appear and raise issues beyond this schema,^{4,9,16} many current manuscripts hold to those earlier, more simplistic divisions and warn, for example, against a lack of specificity in separating approaches.^{9,17}

(See Fig 1.) There are several dangers in these directions: first, that early consensus omits important components of the interpretive tradition. For example, only minimal information on the rich and historically diverse tradition of symbolic interaction is available, aside from the single variant of grounded theory. Second, it conflicts with the current consensus in the social sciences, humanities, and philosophy of science. Third, classification focuses on the level of method, ignoring the major variance in epistemological assumptions existing within each of those divisions.

This article presents an alternate classification, deriving from and more congruent with the broader philosophy of science and social science views. This division conceptualizes the major differences between what can be called phenomenological perspectives and symbolic interactionism. (See Fig 2.) The variants under the major categories of phenomenology and the anthropological tradition of ethnography are not listed, as these have already been adequately addressed within the nursing literature (see, for instance, Leininger,⁷ Morse,⁹ Thompson,¹⁶ and Benner^{4,18}). Only major representatives of each variant are listed under the sociological tradition of ethnography, because of space limitations.

All such divisions are of course arbitrary and increasingly involve overlap. For in-

stance, most symbolic interactionist methodological approaches within sociology are heavily influenced by critical perspectives. Thus, even prior to the critical, feminist, and postmodernist critiques of ethnography, traditional symbolic interactionist research that utilized participant observation examined the power imbalances between physicians and patients (this was prevalent by the 1950s). This situation developed because critical perspectives have been an integral part of classic sociological theory. Such power inequities are an even more central focus within the research currently conducted in that tradition. For instance, both Todd's¹⁹ and Fisher's²⁰ analyses of the cultural differences and power inequities between male physicians and female patients examine those power imbalances and conflicts as they are reflected at both the micro- and macrosociological level. This contrasts with most nursing research within the same methodological tradition. Grounded theory studies, for instance, accord far less emphasis to both power inequities and the broad context within which the phenomenon is located. There are, of course, exceptions to this. Nurse researchers who have been thoroughly grounded in symbolic interactionism incorporate more of both power imbalances and context in their research. For example, Quint's classic "Institutionalized Practices of Information Control"²¹ and Fagerhaugh and Strauss' *Politics of Pain Management*²² have located their analyses within a broad context that heavily acknowledged micropolitical processes.

Another example of such overlap across these divisions is that all the approaches within the interpretive research tradition have historically come to be influenced to various degrees by ideas deriving from both existentialism and phenomenology. Simi-

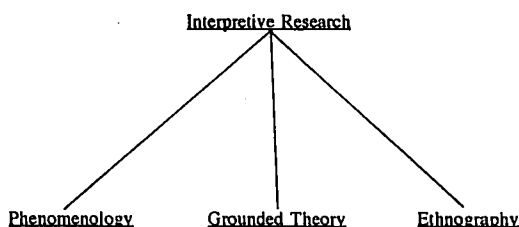


Fig 1. Early nursing classification of major divisions within the interpretive tradition.

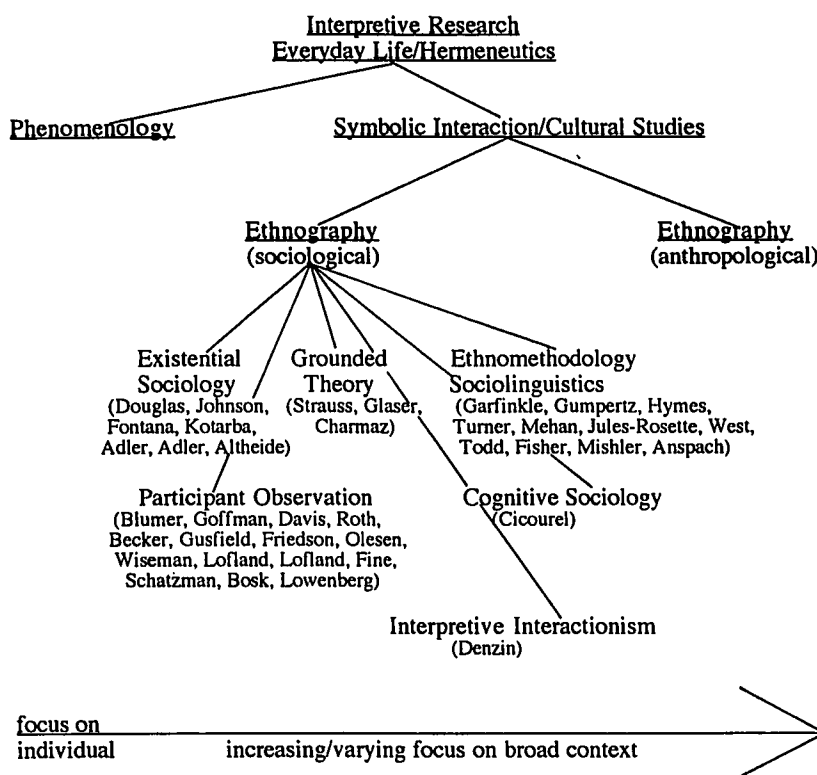


Fig 2. More comprehensive taxonomy of the interpretive tradition.

larly, postmodernist notions are increasingly pervading the range of interpretive methodology approaches.

So although this figure represents only a crude mapping of relationships, obscuring some distinctions and variations within each category, it captures the interpretations of these research approaches in terms and concepts more commonly accepted across disciplines. It differs from the divisions most prevalent in nursing and education in two ways. It recognizes the influence of critical/feminist theory,^{23,24} and it includes two major categories under symbolic interaction and cultural studies: the anthropological tradition of ethnography and the sociological tradition of ethnography and participant observation. In this conceptualization,

grounded theory is located as one variant under the sociological tradition within symbolic interaction. These departures are dealt with in the next section, because their definitions within nursing depart dramatically from those in other disciplines, and their relationships have been most frequently misinterpreted. Because of limitations in the scope of this article, the reader is referred to Thompson¹⁶ and Benner^{4,18} for comprehensive epistemological descriptions of the relationships between phenomenology and the other hermeneutic approaches.

Symbolic interactionism

A major focus of confusion and debate relates to the precise meanings and overlap of definitions ascribed to grounded theory,

symbolic interactionism, and ethnography. Grounded theory is currently recognized as one of the major interpretive or "qualitative" research approaches utilized by nurse researchers. Briefly examining the roots and historical development of this methodological approach may help clarify some common misconceptions.

Beginning during the late 1960s, and continuing into the 1970s and 1980s, a sizable group of nurses received their doctoral education as nurse scholars from the University of California at San Francisco. Many of these nurses took qualitative methods courses and worked with the group of symbolic interactionists who initially dominated the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences within the School of Nursing. Anselm Strauss initiated these courses, and they were taught at various times by Fred Davis, Leonard Schatzman, and Virginia Olesen. Because Strauss taught both the sociologists and the nurses, he, initially in conjunction with Barney Glaser, developed a system of teaching this type of methodology that he called grounded theory, because the resultant theory was grounded in empirical data. Texts published over this period included the process of conducting this methodological approach.^{10,25-27}

These texts, detailing the process of this research method, were widely disseminated by graduates of this program. Because of their accessibility, the grounded theory approach became prominent in both nursing and education, and it was further promoted by leaders such as Stern,^{11,28} Chenitz and Swanson,¹² and Strauss and Corbin.¹⁴ Some nurse researchers continue to view grounded theory as almost synonymous with qualitative research. Another more prevalent view, advanced by Munhall and Oiler Boyd,²⁹ divides qualitative research

into the three types previously mentioned: ethnographic (this is commonly seen as synonymous with anthropology), grounded theory, and phenomenological.

Actually, grounded theory is Strauss and Glaser's version of the broader sociological schools of both ethnography and symbolic interactionism (Chicago school variant). Whereas Strauss and his colleagues have developed excellent approaches in their explication of the grounded theory method, many other sociologists have written on ethnography and participant observation from that same symbolic interactionist perspective. Salient among them have been Norman Denzin,^{30,31} Fred Davis,³² Robert Bogdan and Steven Taylor,³³ John Lofland,^{34,35} Lyn Lofland,³⁵ Leonard Schatzman,²⁵ Jack Douglas,³⁶ Robert Emerson,³⁷ and David Silverman.³⁸ Although each emphasizes different approaches and nuances, all these sociologists represent the broad ethnographic or participant observation research tradition (these terms are used interchangeably by this group, along with field methods). Additionally, these ethnographers come primarily from the symbolic interactionist school,³⁹⁻⁴² which has strong overlaps with social psychology,⁴³ everyday life sociology,^{44,45} the dramaturgic approach,^{46,47} and labeling theory.⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ Often research studies by nurses utilizing grounded theory cite only early references on both grounded theory¹⁰ and Blumer's³⁹ work on symbolic interactionism, ignoring the rich and extensive tradition that has continued to develop since that period.

As more nurse researchers began to use grounded theory as a specific research method (research in education has also moved in this direction), two additional problems developed and intensified. First, many nurse researchers had previously been

thoroughly socialized into positivistic research approaches emulating the biological research model. The lack of structure inherent in grounded theory was difficult to adjust to, and those researchers began to structure the method to increase control and decrease the inherently high level of ambiguity. This tendency was further reinforced by the then prevailing emphasis in nursing to "prove" its scientific merit within academia. In fact, the dialogue aiming to codify this research approach has led to a predominant emphasis within the discipline on the technical aspects of the approach. The focus on techniques and method is at times at the expense of a thorough understanding of the underlying epistemological assumptions and the broad theoretical context in which the approach is located.

Frequently, for journal publication or a grant proposal in nursing, a major portion of an interpretive manuscript may be spent in defining, specifying, and justifying the technical details of the research approach. This not only differs sharply from the presentation of empiricist and realist research reports within nursing, but it also contrasts even more starkly with similar research in the social sciences. For example, in his classic article, "Deviance Disavowal: The Management of Strained Interaction by the Visibly Handicapped," Davis⁵¹ mentions in passing that he informally interviewed a "small number [eleven] of very articulate and socially skilled informants who were visibly handicapped." No further mention of the approach to or specifics of either data collection or analysis appears within the article, yet its quality and ability to enhance our understanding persists and is reflected by its stature 30 years after publication. Goffman's works^{46,47} also have almost no discussion of the technical aspects of analy-

sis or even the "sample" of participants, yet that in no way is seen as detracting from the power of his analyses and their persistence over time.

This creates additional problems in nursing when different journal reviewers assign divergent definitions and attributes to the same terminology. It is disturbing to frequently hear that research reports and grant proposals have been rejected because of such misconceptions. Although a symbolic interactionist or everyday life approach assumes that everyday life involves micro-politics and negotiation, and although studies demonstrate that decisions of different members of the same National Institutes of Health (NIH) peer review pools may have less reliability than we usually assume, there is at least adequate consensus on the major formats and terminology for presenting those research reports. This lack of shared meanings and terminology in the nursing discourse increases the political and potentially arbitrary nature of the evaluation of research conducted within the interpretive position.

Influence of critical and feminist theory and postmodernism

During this same period when nursing and education have increasingly specified and documented the technical dimensions of grounded theory, social scientists have been moving in a diametrically opposed direction. Particularly in sociology and anthropology, but also in a broad range of social sciences and humanities such as political science, literature, and philosophy, the interpretive research approaches not only have gained broader acceptance, but also have moved in more radical and often less structured directions (refer to Rabinow and Sullivan,^{52,53} Hekman,⁵⁴ and Hiley et al⁵⁵).

For instance, while nurses specify and justify more controlled and technical approaches within grounded theory, such as coaxial coding or documenting elaborate audit trails to establish validity, McCall and Becker⁵⁶ present the results of ethnographic analysis as theater performance to remain closer to the interactional aspects of the research process, as well as to more faithfully represent participant accounts. Even the written account of such analysis is presented in the prestigious journal *Social Problems* in theatre-script format. Similarly, as many nurse researchers attempt to justify the “scientific validity” of ethnography in positivistic terms, Krieger describes ethnography as fiction or as art form.^{57,58} These are not frivolous negations of scholarship, but rather serious examinations of the nature of social knowledge and the problematic aspects of representation.

The major shifts across approaches

There are three primary components to these ongoing shifts in the conduct and interpretation of this type of interpretive research in the social sciences. All three have evolved historically, so that these shifts are still “in process.” Varying degrees of emphasis of each component are seen within both the phenomenological and symbolic interaction traditions. These shifts increasingly influence nursing research conducted within this tradition as well.^{4,16,18,59}

First, phenomenological and existential influences have become far more pervasive across the entire range of interpretive approaches. Various offshoots within sociology, for example, include ethnomethodology,^{60–64} cognitive sociology,⁶⁵ and existential sociology.^{66,67} Both theory and research in the social sciences are increas-

ingly emphasizing everyday life experience, the importance of multiple, relativistic constructions of reality, and the ambiguity and complexity inherent in both everyday life and the research enterprise. Language comes to be seen as increasingly complex, situated, and problematic.

Second, the pivotal importance of locating the researcher as a participant in the research process has been increasingly emphasized and analyzed. The notions of researcher as participant and the importance of reflexivity for the researcher come up repeatedly across the participating disciplines. Ruby's⁶⁸ compilation, *The Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*, parallels Cicourel's⁶⁵ or Jules-Rosette's⁶⁹ emphasis on the researcher's analysis of his or her research account in sociology. Mehan and Wood⁶³ even have a chapter in their book on ethnomethodology describing the reflexivity of reflexivity. Philosophers and sociologists of knowledge, such as Woolgar⁷⁰ and Ashmore,⁷¹ also devote entire books to analyzing the complexities of reflexivity. Not only is the researcher's account seen as one of many everyday life constructions of a phenomenon (an account not necessarily more privileged than those of other participants), but also the interactive nature of participant observation is open to far more careful scrutiny. Thus, for example, there is an emphasis on reflexively examining “taken-for-granted” assumptions of all the participants, including the researcher.

Another component of this shift is the emphasis on the location of the researcher in relation to other participants in terms of power and status inequities. Anthropologists such as Wolf⁷² conceptualize this as a reaction to colonialism and imperialism, raised by both the feminist and postmodern

critiques. Sociologists conceptualize this shift as incorporating more critical and feminist perspectives into participant-observation approaches, and this process also attempts to link micro and macro social processes more closely.

Third, not only are more disciplines actively embracing these interpretive approaches, but also they are doing so within a collaborative, interdisciplinary framework. For example, Rabinow and Sullivan's⁵³ 1987 compilation presents views of interpretive social science from sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and psychologists. Similarly, Hekman⁵⁴ wrote *Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge* from her vantage point as a political scientist. Many variants of these research methodologies have moved to less structured frameworks incorporating more hermeneutic, constructionist concepts and techniques. Examples included ethnomethodology, sociolinguistics, existential sociology, phenomenology, action research, and so on. All are more heavily influenced by postmodernist perspectives, as well.⁷²⁻⁷⁴

This broader framework extends beyond the social sciences to the humanities, where it actually originated. Literature, drama, and film have increasingly emphasized everyday life perspectives, as well as focusing on deconstruction and semiotics.⁷⁵ For instance, historians have progressively focused on topics such as the everyday private life experience of women working in early industrialized America,⁷⁶ rather than examining elite groups and activities in the public domain.

Similarly, science studies (this includes sociology, history, and philosophy of science) have shifted from primarily examining the historical process of knowledge generation as an incremental and progressive

development toward incorporating analyses of the everyday conduct of laboratory science as a social and political accomplishment. Seminal work in this tradition is exemplified by Latour and Woolgar,⁷⁷ Knorr-Cetina,⁷⁸ and Latour.⁷⁹

QUANDARIES IN TERMINOLOGY

Beyond these broad trends, three additional discrepancies occur frequently in nursing and education. Some of them are seen in the social science research literature as well. Many of the most frequent misinterpretations relate to the disparate meanings and usage of the terms phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnography, and empirical.

First, the term phenomenology is associated with numerous meanings. Beyond the differences in focus of the diverse philosophical views that constitute the broad phenomenological tradition in philosophy, there is a definite lack of clarity in distinguishing between phenomenological assumptions underlying research approaches and the phenomenological method. Numerous phenomenological and existential assumptions underlie all the interpretive approaches discussed here, although to various degrees. Ethnographic research, participant observation, and phenomenological methods all incorporate some of the assumptions discussed previously. However, as Thompson¹⁶ demonstrates, the conclusions of, for example, Husserl and Heidegger involve divergent epistemological and ontological assumptions. Thus the term phenomenological is less useful in epistemological or methodological debates unless the specific meaning and assumptions of the term in that context are made explicit.

On the other hand, phenomenological method usually refers to one of two specific

approaches. The first consists of the researcher capturing the lived experience of participants studied.^{3,4,16} While ethnographers from both the anthropological and sociological traditions also attempt to learn the deep level of symbolic meanings that comprise a specific phenomenon, they usually attempt to triangulate various perspectives of the participants, placing more emphasis on interaction, social context, and the social construction of reality.⁸⁰ This contrasts with a more individualistic cognitive construction of reality in most phenomenological analysis (Benner's work is a major exception, as it is thoroughly grounded in the contemporary epistemological assumptions of the broad, interdisciplinary interpretive movement; Thompson's work also consolidates this expanded view, particularly incorporating interactional views that account for power differentials in the social construction process).

This set of problems relates primarily to the confusion between the three levels of (1) epistemology or philosophy of knowledge, (2) methodology, and (3) methods (specific techniques for gathering evidence), according to Harding's⁸¹ 1987 distinction. The problems are exacerbated by the evolution of those meanings and their diffusion over time.

The second common usage of phenomenological method involves hermeneutic method and the analysis of texts to derive symbolic meanings. Again, the symbolic interactionists increasingly incorporate analysis of text, accounts, and narrative, often including broad definitions of interaction as text. Yet the symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists, who come from the social sciences rather than directly from philosophy, tend to focus more on the context within which the text is embedded. For

example, talk is seen by the ethnomethodologists as "indexical." Basically, this concept locates meaning in the context rather than in the text; thus, most talk cannot be interpreted without extensive background knowledge of both the participants' symbolic meanings and the social environment, particularly if the participants in the interaction have a shared history. Increasingly there has been a major split between the group of symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists who focus on methods such as conversational analysis to locate invariant properties, and the group who see meaning emerging and negotiated interactionally through symbolic, nonverbal communication that includes nonverbal nuances and the symbolic meanings of dress and other cultural artifacts.

Thus a hermeneutic perspective is increasingly incorporated within the broad range of interpretive approaches, in that reality is seen as consisting of buzzing chaos that must be interpreted cognitively, rather than as an objective reality waiting to be discovered. This view is also commonly labeled a constructionist or constructivist perspective. Language provides the mediation between individual cognitive processes and the socially shared and cultural aspects of interpretation. Yet hermeneutic method applies specifically to one type of phenomenological research approach. This distinction again appears to flow from whether one is looking at the level of epistemology, where hermeneutic equates with interpretive, or at the level of method and specific research techniques. It also derives from whether the methodological approach evolves more directly from philosophy or social science disciplines.

Another common departure from the current social science consensus on this set of

interpretive approaches relates to the prevalent definitions of ethnography within nursing. As mentioned earlier, nurse scholars commonly see ethnography as the primary research approach used by anthropologists. Actually, the ethnographic or participant-observation tradition has been historically prominent within both anthropology and sociology. Not only do the two traditions share common roots, but also, until recently, many universities housed anthropologists and sociologists within the same department. In anthropology, one of the most familiar ethnographic classics is Margaret Mead's⁸² *Coming of Age in Samoa*, written in 1928. In sociology, the Chicago school of symbolic interaction produced parallel ethnographic classics such as Thomas and Znaniecki's⁸³ five volumes on *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920) and William Foote Whyte's⁸⁴ *Street Corner Society* (1943). Medical anthropology and sociology have been even more closely aligned, and classic research includes Mark Zborowski's⁸⁵ work on cultural responses to pain, as well as Fred Davis's⁸⁶ research on polio victims and their families. Glaser and Strauss's^{87,88} research on dying trajectories also came from this approach. That work was analyzed in collaboration with Jeanne Quint Benoliel, probably the first nurse researcher with a thorough grounding in this participant-observation approach. The current editors of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* are both sociologists from the symbolic-interaction tradition (the journal has associate editors representing both sociology and anthropology).

A final, yet paramount, problematic term complicating the dialogue on these interpretive research approaches is "empirical." Most nurse scholars use the terms empirical and empiricism interchangeably: at times to

denote the tradition of positivistic research, at times to refer to the postpositivist research approach known as realism,⁸⁹ and at still other times to indicate observational data. In the philosophy of science, the "empiricist" tradition of research is more precisely equated with the postpositivist or received view of science and truth. It refers to the level of epistemology or the philosophy of knowledge. Because most nurse scholars continue to use it either as the equivalent of empirical or to refer to controlled research studies in the realist tradition, we need to define the specific meanings of its usage to avoid confusion.

On the other hand, empirical research utilizes observable evidence as data. Empirical data can be utilized for analysis within all three epistemological traditions; however, the precise definitions of what qualifies as empirical vary, and the claims made for what the data represent diverge widely. The social sciences, including psychology, have moved from an emphasis 20 years ago on behaviorism to a recognition that important human phenomena, both intrapsychic and interactional, cannot be reduced to observable behavior. In the ethnographic research tradition, both in anthropology and sociology, the methodological approach has been defined as empirical; thus, a great deal of empirical research comes from the symbolic interactionist tradition. In fact, Glaser and Strauss coined the term for their symbolic interactionist variant grounded theory, because that entire tradition grounds its research in empirical data. Empirical has come to be used to include self-reports, perceptions, stories, and text, as well as observable behavior.

Initially, empirical research was based on observable phenomena that could be measured (the method evolved from the obser-

vational techniques utilized in biological research in natural settings). Over time, however, symbolic meanings came to be seen as accessible and empirical, as the participants' experiences came to be viewed as legitimate. More recently, the problematic nature of the interpretation of terms and meanings became a strong focus of social science inquiry. Thus, Mehan and Wood⁶³ explain how ethnomethodology combines empirical research with a critical, hermeneutic stance. The degree of latitude and relativism accorded to empirical work varies widely in contemporary research.

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The more closely any of these ambiguous assumptions and meanings are examined, the more complex they appear. Distinct interpretations of the same term stem from differences in disciplinary assumptions, divergent approaches within each discipline, and the evolution of these interpretations over time. At this point, when the interpretive approaches are flourishing expansively throughout the social sciences and humani-

ties, and when nursing is increasingly incorporating these approaches, we need to more carefully examine the terminology and make explicit our underlying assumptions on these complex issues. This is important not only for improving the quality of our research, but also for increasing our participation in the larger dialogue around these issues currently taking place throughout academia.

Because much of nursing research is concerned with everyday life issues and socially shared meanings, this set of approaches both holds promise for our future research endeavors and offers us a powerful contributory role in the current dialogue. As we explore these complex issues further, it is especially important not to rigidly define or construct artificial boundaries too quickly, particularly during a time of revolutionary transition. As we move further toward arriving at some degree of consensual definitions within the discipline, we need to assure that those meanings remain in touch with the broad movement toward interpretive approaches occurring throughout academia.

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