

'On the why's and the wherefore's of research'

It is always interesting to those thinking mortals among us, to inquire into the motivation of people. "Why do you do it?" and "Why like this?" and "Why not like that?" are discussions which gives us endless pleasure. We believe that one cannot actually understand an activity unless one understands why people do it. Recently, the systems approach theorists have been saying the same thing in different words. They say that a system can only be analyzed if you start by identifying its overt and covert objectives.

When dealing with nursing research, the question therefore arises: "Why are nurses doing research?" I believe that the motivation for doing research may affect the process significantly.

In her inaugural address at RAU in October 1989, Prof Heili Uys discussed statistics which show that most of the nursing research in South Africa is still being done as a requirement for a post-graduate degree. She further showed that independent research, which is not part of a degree requirement, has declined over the last few years. This indicates that one major reason for nurses doing research, is in order to obtain higher degrees.

Another reason for doing research prevalent among university staff, is the "publish or perish" maxim heard more and more often on our campuses. The subsidy system of universities depends both on a per capita student payment, and a payment per research publication.

Both of these reasons will probably not impress a purist, and will not be found in the introductory chapters of nursing research textbooks under the heading "Why is research necessary?". Authors on nursing research list such objectives as to observe in order to know, to predict, to control, and to prescribe, or to generate a knowledge base, develop and test nursing theories, and to become more accountable in our practice. In other words, they expect nursing research to be done primarily for reasons of improving scientific nursing practice. Of course, this is also the kind of objective that nurse researchers state at the beginning of each research report. This is therefore, the overt objective of nursing research, while the degrees and the money could be seen as the covert objectives of nursing research.

Systems analysts tell us that covert objectives are no problem, as long as they do not detract from or clash with the overt objectives. The question is therefore what the implications are for nursing research of the two strong covert objectives.

The dangers of the "research to get a degree" objective, to my mind is firstly that a certain kind of research is produced, namely small projects which one researcher can handle independantly, with a limited budget and limited time and skill. Most problems in nursing and health care cannot be addressed by such projects. They are too complex, and too large. Secondly, this kind of motivation leads to the researcher producing a thesis, but not necessarily an article. Research findings are therefore not published widely, and do not become available for nurses in practice. Such research is close to useless.

The danger of "research for publications", is that easy, quick projects are produced, which researchers desperately trying to fit in between all the other demands on their time. They work with captive samples (often their own students) to limit time spent, and the design and literature survey is often less than adequate because not enough time is spent on it.

One cannot afford to lose sight of reality, which in this case includes the covert as well as the overt objectives of nursing research. Nor can one afford to lose sight of the real nursing research needs of this country. We need real, complex problems to be addressed. Many of these problems cannot be solved by either single-person research or single-discipline research. We need the limited time and energy and money available for nursing research to be used on well-planned, useful studies. We need the results of nursing research to be disseminated as widely as possible. Perhaps we can achieve both set of goals with a bit more thought and planning.

