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Editorial: Philosophical Basis for Grounded Theory Research

Over the past four decades, numerous nurse researchers have used the grounded theory method when conducting qualitative research. Like all approaches to research, whether qualitative or quantitative, the grounded theory method is based upon a particular philosophy. That philosophy is symbolic interaction, which evolved out of the work of James,¹ Cooley,² Mead³ and Blumer⁴. While one does not need to agree with the philosophy of symbolic interaction in order to conduct grounded theory research, it is advisable for the researcher to have basic working knowledge of this philosophical approach to science.

Symbolic interaction views human behavior as an ongoing activity humans construct based upon their reality of situations encountered and interpreted through interactions with themselves and others. Interaction with self and others allows for the development of understanding situations and making choices. One learns, through social interactions, the meaning and symbols essential for the expression of thought. How individuals interpret and give meaning to interactions influences their behavior during future interactions. According to Mead,³ five central tenants exist within human society:

- 1) The human is an organism that has a self and self-interaction. The self is composed to two components: "I" and "me." "I" is the active interpreting component of the self, while "me" is the object of self-reflection. Since humans are actors, they become the objects of their own actions (self-interaction).
- 2) In order to act, one has to identify both what he/she wants, interpret the actions of others and figure out what to do.
- 3) Social interaction involves interpretation and creation of the society in which we live, and gives us the core qualities that make us unique in nature (our symbols, self and mind).
- 4) Human beings live in an environment of objects (physical, social and abstract) around which their activities are structured.
- 5) Social action is the larger collective of each participant's actions that fit together.

In addition, Blumer⁴ believed symbolic interactions rest on three simple premises:

- 1) Human beings act toward things (i.e. physical objects, other human beings and categories of human beings) based on the meaning things have to them. The meanings attributed to things account for human behavior.
- 2) The meaning of things is derived from social interactions that one has with others. Thus, the meaning attributed to things arises during the process of interactions between and among people.
- 3) The meaning of things constructed by the actor (human) occurs through a process of interpretation.

Thus, human beings interpret each other's actions and respond to those actions based on the meaning that has been attached to them.

In summary, symbolic interaction focuses on the nature of one's social interactions, which are built up over time, with others. Human actions involve interactions, between individuals and within one's self, that require the act of thinking. One's behavior does not result simply from reality, but from how one defines a situation in the present. Finally, the role of an active human being (actor) involves interacting, thinking, defining, applying past situations to the present and making decisions based on factors in the immediate situation.

The grounded theory method of qualitative research is based on the symbolic interaction perspective. The founders of the method, Glaser and Strauss,⁵ called the method "grounded" because a theory is systematically obtained from a wide array of data obtained through a rigorous process of constant comparison. The grounded theory method allows a researcher to examine research participants': a) lives and activities from the perspective of their physical, emotional, social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual worlds; b) points of view; and, c) behaviors as meaningful expressions. Regardless of whether implementation of the grounded theory method of research focuses on Glaser's⁶ or Strauss's and Corbin's⁷ approach to dealing with the data, both approaches rest upon the basic philosophical underpinnings of symbolic interaction.

References:

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