

9-7-2017

Connecting Theory, Knowledge, and Practice: A Review of Action Research for Nurses

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Recommended APA Citation

Lam, G. (2017). Connecting Theory, Knowledge, and Practice: A Review of Action Research for Nurses. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(9), 2357-2368. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss9/6>

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Abstract

Nurses are faced with everyday demands to improve practices, yet using research to develop and apply theory, knowledge, and practices is a task fraught with challenges to the nursing profession. McDonnell and McNiff (2016) offer a practical guide for novice nursing practitioners and researchers to understand and conduct action research.

Keywords

Nursing, Action Research, Practice, Critical

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Connecting Theory, Knowledge, and Practice: A Review of *Action Research for Nurses*

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Nurses are faced with everyday demands to improve practices, yet using research to develop and apply theory, knowledge, and practices is a task fraught with challenges to the nursing profession. McDonnell and McNiff (2016) offer a practical guide for novice nursing practitioners and researchers to understand and conduct action research. Keywords: Nursing, Action Research, Practice, Critical

In my daily encounter with educational and medical professionals, I often hear stories about practitioners getting swamped by their overwhelming amount of workloads and competing demands. In particular, despite the fact that nurses always strive to provide quality care to their patients, they struggle with how to improve their daily practices. How can nurses use theory and research to improve services? How can their practices contribute to the advancement of nursing theory and knowledge? McDonnell and McNiff's (2016) *Action Research for Nurses* may provide some hints for nurses to reclaim their profession and restore their practices.

McDonnell and McNiff (2016) open the book with an eight-page introduction that one must not miss. It guides you through a thorough reflection on the formulation, acquisition, and usage of knowledge in nursing research. It also offers some critical analyses on the political issues faced in nursing practice and research in the contemporary United Kingdom. Against the backdrop of systemic failure and political dilemmas found in the medical field, McDonnell and McNiff encourage nurses to engage in action research to “investigate their practices as reflective practitioners” (p. 6) and “appreciate that developing themselves as researchers is perfectly achievable and beneficial” (p. 7).

The main body of the book is divided into three parts, which describe the theory, processes, and significance of action research, respectively. Part I provides the theoretical background and rationales for conducting action research. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a review of the epistemological bases of knowledge, the socio-historical development of the profession, and a critical reflection of contemporary practices that gives strong rationales for engaging in action research for practical, social, and emancipatory purposes. Not explicitly stated, action research described in the book is certainly influenced by critical paradigms. Throughout the book, McDonnell and McNiff (2016) emphasize the political intents of conducting research and using findings to make changes. They also advocate for an acute awareness to interrogate the social, historical, and political contexts where research and knowledge situate. Chapter 3 delineates the nature of ethics in action research as local, situated, and lived, which demands critical reflections of researcher positionality.

Part II describes strategies for planning and designing an action research project, offering hands-on advice on research issues commonly found in real-life settings. Chapter 4 explains how researchers should be prepared to deal with different organizational issues and academic demands. Chapter 5 describes guiding questions that help researchers to design and implement action plans. Chapter 6 elucidates the needs to gather data on the learning and actions of researchers and other participants. Chapter 7 describes considerations of how to generate evidence and evaluate research.

Part III is focused on organizing, representing, and disseminating research findings. Chapter 8 begins by describing “dilemmas about being able to demonstrate the validity of what they are saying within a social or political context that often denies them legitimacy” (p. 134), which McDonnell and McNiff (2016) suggest could be mitigated by writing up research results for public consumption and recognition. Chapter 9 reminds researchers to consider the significance of research on personal, professional, and political dimensions.

The book is well-suited for novice nursing students, practitioners, educators, and researchers who desire to learn about why and how to improve their practices using action research methodologies. Readers will benefit from reflecting on the guiding questions throughout the text, through which you can delve into a dialogue with McDonnell and McNiff (2016) who give practical suggestions for developing your own action research projects. Using numerous case examples, interview vignettes, and excerpts from the literature, they share their rich experience in conducting action research themselves and overseeing other nurses’ projects in different settings around the world. However, despite the efforts of McDonnell and McNiff (2016) in modelling “a dialogical approach towards nursing” (p. 41) by acknowledging the multiple voices of researchers and practitioners, readers may need to get accustomed to going back and forth among descriptions, quotes, and vignettes, and read between the lines in order to abstract the main ideas, which may be difficult for entry-level audience who expect otherwise more concrete guidelines to follow. Moreover, this book does not include major citations for terms and definitional issues, although practitioners who do not engage in formal academic writing may not necessarily benefit from these references.

McDonnell and McNiff’s (2016) work contributes to the field of nursing and qualitative research in general by offering an introductory guide to action research that facilitates the development and application of theory, knowledge, and practice. McDonnell and McNiff set a good role model for fellow nurses to take action and conduct research to contribute to the knowledge base and everyday practices “for the good of the most important group – the patients” (p. 161).

References

McDonnell, P., & McNiff, J. (2016). *Action research for nurses*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Author Note

Gary Yu Hin Lam is a Ph.D. candidate in School Psychology at the University of South Florida with specializations in autism and school-based mental health. His research and practice interests include providing psychological services for youth and their families across school, clinical, and community settings. His professional goal is to promote well-being among individuals with autism across the lifespan. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: yuhinlam@mail.usf.edu.

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Article Citation

Hin Lam, G. Y. (2017). Connecting theory, knowledge, and practice: A review of *Action Research for Nurses*. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(9), 2367-2368. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss9/6>
