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Qualitative Research in Nursing: Bibliometric Study

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Abstract

In this study, we explored the production of qualitative nursing research in program repositories evaluated by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel in Brazil, with concepts six and seven. We utilized a bibliometric study in which we considered Brazilian theses and dissertations with qualitative methodology published in 2018 and 2019 with qualitative methodology. In the 100 papers, 79 theses, and 13 dissertations, we identified that the types of studies that stood out were phenomenology, the wording of the objectives predominantly used the verbs “understand,” and “analyze,” and the instruments and techniques used were semi-structured interviews which present the analysis technique of the author Bardin, highlighting publications on public health. We conclude that our study evidences the importance of using a qualitative approach in nursing and emphasizes the need to pay attention to the theoretical framework, as well as analysis aspects adopted in different types of qualitative studies.

Keywords

nursing, bibliometric, Brazil, review literature, qualitative research

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Keywords: nursing, bibliometric, Brazil, review literature, qualitative research

Introduction

Qualitative research is a way of looking; it is a perspective that involves observation, recording, and feelings. In addition, it mainly incorporates the senses of sight, hearing, and smell to deeply capture what we wish to investigate; it allows addressing what human beings think and feel, their history, dreams, relationships, hopes, experiences, and a network of aspects that can all be connected to the reality of the researcher, who is also a human being (Villamil-Gallego & Gómez-Builes, 2019).

Qualitative health research works with the universe of meanings, motivations, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes, which corresponds to a more profound setting of relationships, processes, and phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables. This type of approach, in addition to allowing the unveiling of still scantily-known social process referring to particular groups, enables constructing new approaches, reviewing literature, and creating new concepts and categories during research. It is characterized by systematizing knowledge to understand the group's internal logic or the process under study (Minayo, 2010).

An essential aspect related with qualitative research is that, given the close relationship established between the researcher and the participants, it is easier for the participant to contribute effectively, filling gaps between scientific evidence and professional practice (Duque-Páramo, 2019). Some of the tools of this research are important subjective elements that are part of the science of nursing as a discipline and social profession, with care as an object of study and work, and with human beings in their individual and collective dimensions, as subjects of this care (Lomba et al., 2018).

Within this context, from scientific production focused on qualitative studies, it is important to evaluate the types of productions the programs are producing, especially those with great impact. For this, it is essential to know that the graduate assessment, conducted by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES, for the term in Portuguese), which results in the CAPES concept attributed every four years, has a scale ranging from three to seven. Thus, graduate programs with concepts six and seven have higher quality for the evaluated area.

Therefore, as a researcher, I consider qualitative research of great importance, not only for its way of approaching the meanings and actions of people and their relationship with their context, but also because it explains the social facts, seeking the way to understand them, analyzing, interpreting and understanding the studied reality as it appears. In addition, I have experience in this approach through my graduate studies: the research I developed while working on my doctorate had this approach, and knowledge of this production and its characteristics could further support my methodology. From this panorama, in this study we sought to explore the production of qualitative nursing research in the repositories of programs evaluated by the Brazilian CAPES, with concepts six and seven.

Methods

This is a bibliometric study that maps the production of scientific literature into patterns (Bastos et al., 2021). Bibliometric analysis does not produce original evidence, but instead, produces other complementary results, such as the most productive topics, authors, countries, scientific production maps.

The study had as its starting point the questioning that resulted in the following guiding question: how has the production of qualitative nursing research been conducted in concept six and seven (CAPES) graduate programs in Brazil? The research itinerary considered the following items and stages:

Eligibility criteria: As a sample, studies that met the following inclusion criteria were considered: theses and dissertations must be published in 2018 and 2019, in repositories of concept programs six and seven (CAPES) in the field of nursing, and available online and with qualitative methodological approach.

Information sources: The search took place from December 2019 to March 2020 in repositories of concept programs six and seven (CAPES). No contacts were made with the authors of the studies.

Research strategy: The descriptors and/or keywords used were “*qualitative*,” and “*nursing*.” Selection, data extraction, and evaluation of theses and dissertations (full-text PDF files), were carried out by two independent reviewers and differences were resolved by a third reviewer; they received adequate training. The selection step was performed by reading the title and abstract with subsequent application of the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Study records: The content analysis was developed through the discussion that the themes and data raised, and included the research corpus; normally, in this type of analysis, the fundamental elements of communication are identified, numbered, and categorized.

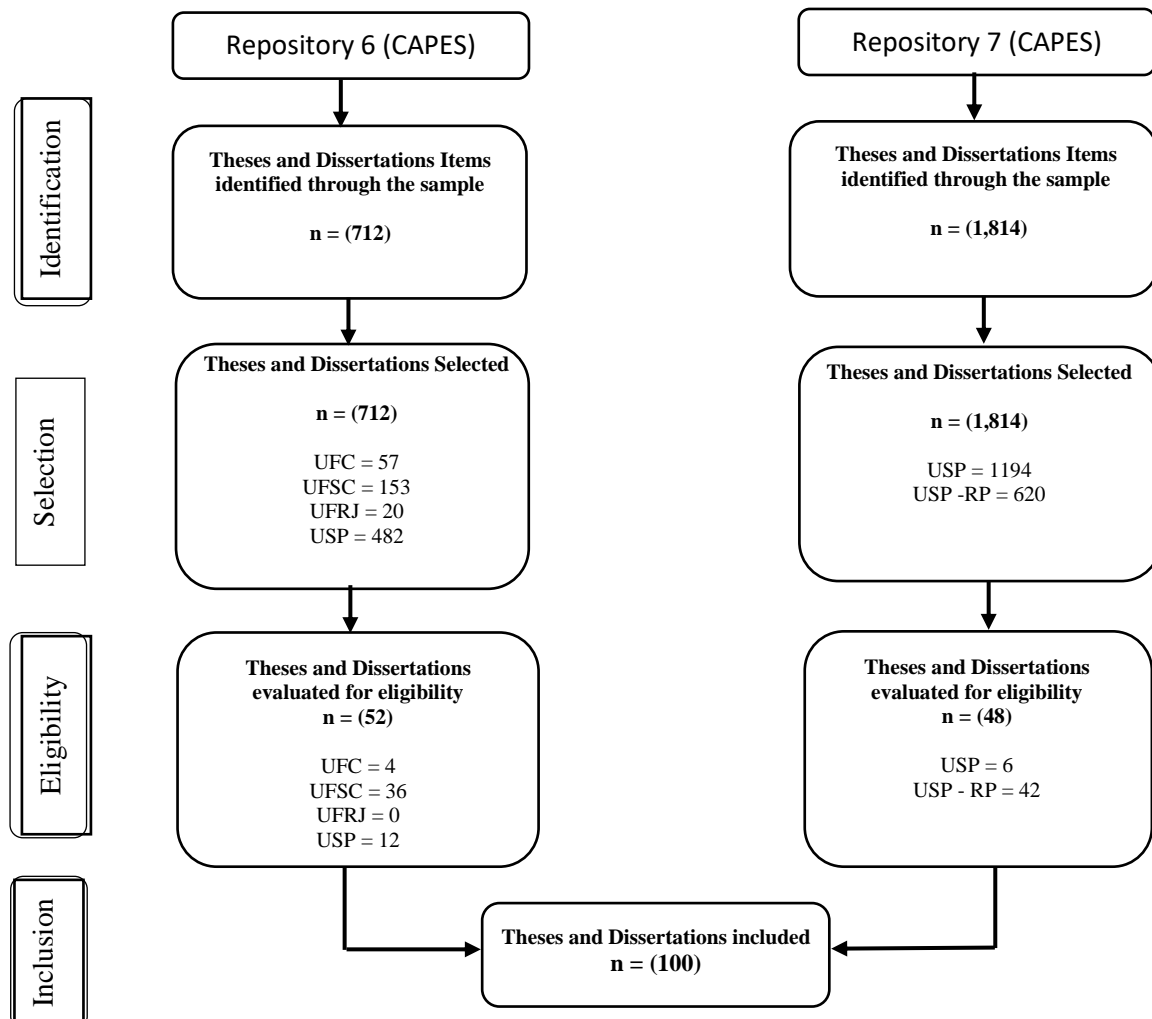
After selection, the theses and dissertations were read in detail and information was extracted and gathered in a table containing the following data: title, objective, type of study, qualitative strategies, period of realization, population, year, and CAPES concept.

Data analysis: Comparative and frequency analyses were performed to describe the structure of the articles and characteristics of theses and authors of qualitative studies in biomedical literature.

Results

For data evaluation, 712 (CAPES 6) and 1,814 (CAPES 7) theses and dissertations were identified in the program repositories (Figure 1). Thus, in the repositories of programs with concept six and seven (CAPES), 660 and 1,766 theses and dissertations were excluded, based on the previous reading of their abstracts, because they were not part of the nursing theme or because they did not fit the study's guiding question. Lastly, 79 theses and 21 dissertations were selected to form the basis of this study (72% - CAPES 6; and 26% - CAPES 7). Figure 1 details the stages of the process.

Figure 1 – Number of theses and dissertations identified in the repositories, according to descriptors and limits established for the review literature – Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2021.



Source: Elaborated by the authors. Fortaleza, 2021

According to the year of defense, 2018 generated a greater number of studies than in 2019 (66 and 34 studies, respectively). The types of studies utilized by the theses and dissertations identified in the CAPES 6 and 7 repositories were: phenomenology (5), ethnography (1), case study (1), historical studies (4), descriptive qualitative research (3), and grounded theory (4), with descriptive/exploratory being the most used (37 theses and dissertations; Table 1).

The objective verbs that predominated in the theses and dissertations identified in the CAPES 6 and 7 repositories were: “understand” (24), “know” (14), and “analyze” (31) (Table 1). Other less expressive verbs found less frequently were: “build,” “identify,” “describe,” “promote,” “evaluate,” “verify,” “characterize,” and “apprehend.”

The instruments and techniques used in the theses and dissertations were: focal group, participant observation, and field diaries and surveys (phenomenological and semi-structured), with semi-structured interviews being the most used (found in 56 theses and dissertations) (Table 1). Others, used less frequently, were: documents, guiding questions, reflection meetings, video/checklist, and thematic oral history.

Table 1. Type of study, verbs of objectives and instruments and technique of the theses and dissertations identified in the CAPES 6 and 7 repositories - Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2021.

Type of Study	CAPES 6	%	CAPES 7	%
Exploratory – Descriptive	29	55.7	8	16.66
Exploratory	3	5.7	5	10.41
Descriptive	3	5,7	16	33
Historical	4	7.69	---	---
Case Study	1	1.92	---	---
Grounded Theory	4	7.69	5	10.41
Phenomenological	5	9.61	---	---
Ethnographic	1	1.92	---	---
Qualitative – descriptive research	3	5.7	14	29.16
Verbs of Objectives	CAPES 6	%	CAPES 7	%
To comprehend	19	36.53	5	10.41
To know	12	23.07	2	4.16
To analyze	1	1.92	30	62.5
To identify	6	11.53	2	4.16
To construct	5	9.61	2	4.16
To describe	5	9.61	1	2.08
Other	4	7.69	8	16.66
Instruments and Technique	CAPES 6	%	CAPES 7	%
Semi-structured Interviews	35	62.5	21	27.63
Survey	10	17.85	15	23.68
Focal Group	4	7.14	9	11.84
Participant Observation	3	5.35	9	11.84
Questionnaire	---	---	10	13.15
Phenomenological Survey	2	3.57	---	---
Field Diaries	2	3.57	7	9.21
Other	---	---	5	6.75

Source: Elaborated by the authors. Fortaleza, 2021

The number of participants in theses and dissertations was 1,918, with 850 in (CAPES 6) and 1,078 in (CAPES 7); among them: nursing professors, nursing professionals, mothers, adolescents, patients, students, health professionals, and others (health residents, pregnant women, children, elderly, drivers, people with HIV, multidisciplinary professionals, dentists, occupational therapists, relatives, psychologists, and social workers; Table 2).

With regard to nursing professionals, different areas stand out, such as primary health care, family health strategy, adult and neonate intensive care unit, surgery, aesthetics, and nursing technicians. As for the average number of participants per study, most studies had samples between 11 and 20 participants (Table 2).

In the classification related to the analysis technique, Bardin stands out with 17 theses and 10 dissertations identified; in addition, Minayo also stands out with 20 theses and dissertations (Table 2). Other analysis references present were: Corbin Juliet E Strauss, Corbin Anselm, José Luís Guedes dos Santos, Elo S., Kyngäs H., Jesus M., Capalbo C., Mab Merighi, Pierre Bourdieu, and Fablet Barros.

Table 2. Types of participants, number of participants and referential of analysis of the theses and dissertations identified in the CAPES 6 and 7 repositories - Fortaleza, CE, Brazil, 2021.

Types of Participants	CAPES 6	%	CAPES 7	%
Nursing professor	---	---	5	8.92
Nursing professionals	29	46.77	12	21.42
Mothers	10	16.12	1	1.78
Adolescents	4	6.45	3	5.35
Patients	3	4.83	7	12.5
Students	2	3.22	8	14.28
Health professional	1	1.61	8	14.28
Other	13	20.96	12	21.42
Number of Participants	CAPES 6	%	CAPES 7	%
1 – 10	22	42.30	7	14.58
11 – 20	21	40.38	23	47.91
21 – 30	8	15.38	8	16.66
31 – 40	---	---	6	12.5
> 50	1	1.92	4	8.33
Referential of Analysis	CAPES 6	%	CAPES 7	%
<i>BARDIN, Laurence</i>	11	33.33	16	34.04
MINAYO, Maria Cecilia de Souza	16	48.48	4	8.51
BRAUN; CLARKE,	---	---	8	17.02
Other	6	18.18	19	40.42

Source: Elaborated by the authors. Fortaleza, 2021

It should be noted that among the production/studies of programs with maximum score present in the CAPES 6 and 7 repository, the distribution of theses and dissertations were published in the following areas: Psychiatric Nursing (19), Fundamental Nursing (24), Nursing in Public Health (40), Technology and Innovation in Nursing (13), Fundamentals and Practices of Management in Nursing and Health (4).

Discussion

The results show that in studies with qualitative design/approach, the orientation is given by different areas with different methods and approaches. However, some general features of the research design are applicable, such as flexibility to adjust to what is discovered during collection, triangulation of data collection, holistic understanding, and need for researchers' involvement to reflect on the benefits of data analysis in progress to guide future projects (Polit & Beck, 2019).

In this sense, qualitative research is based on several designs, perspectives, methodologies, approaches, modalities, and techniques used in the stages of planning, conducting, and evaluating the studies, resulting in inquiries/investigations that seek to comprehend, describe, and/or understand investigative social/problematic situations (González, 2020).

Thus, it is also worth noting that 55% of qualitative studies do not have a theoretical and/or methodological framework. In some cases, researchers indicate that they performed a qualitative study, a naturalistic investigation, or a content analysis of qualitative data. Thereby, some qualitative studies do not have a defined theoretical framework, nor do they fit into any typology, being called descriptive, qualitative studies. These studies tend to be eclectic in their designs and methods and are based on the general premises of constructivist research (Polit & Beck, 2019).

Another point assessed among the studies identified in the sample was that researchers often communicate information on their approach through verbal reports. In this perspective, subdividing content into smaller parts to understand the final structure, identify the parts, analyze the relationship between the parts, and recognize the organizational principles involved is made possible by using verbs (Bicudo & Costa, 2019; Ferraz & Belhot, 2010).

The greatest number of participants in dissertations fell into the range of 1 to 10, while in the theses it was in the range of 11 to 20. On this aspect, there is convergence of the study in question with the "golden rule" about the number of participants in qualitative research: there must be two to 60 participants, a number defined based on research criteria, numerical guidelines from empirical studies to achieve theoretical saturation, and a statistical formula that consists of using probability to estimate the sample size in accordance with the significance level statistic desired (Guest et al., 2006; Sim et al., 2018). It is therefore necessary to justify the respective decisions made to determine the number of participants.

Thus, a study whose purpose is to explore or describe some phenomenon is likely to be an investigation into a poorly researched topic, often involving a qualitative approach, such as phenomenology and ethnography. The objective of a qualitative study can also use verbs such as, "understand," "discover," or "generate" (Polit & Beck, 2019; Guest et al., 2006). In this perspective, the study results reveal that in the dissertations, the most-used verb was "understand" and in the theses, the verb, "analyze." Comparatively, understanding occupies the second step in the cognitive domain categories proposed by Bloom, Eglehart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl, while analysis occupies the fourth step in the same model (Ferraz & Belhot, 2010).

Thus, it is also worth noting that 55% of qualitative studies do not have a theoretical and/or methodological framework. In some cases, researchers indicate that they performed a qualitative study, a naturalistic investigation, or a content analysis of qualitative data. Thereby, some qualitative studies do not have a defined theoretical framework, nor do they fit into any typology, being called descriptive, qualitative studies. A similar study reveals that articles employed descriptive research, but there was little consensus on what "descriptive" meant (Ball et al., 2011). These studies tend to be eclectic in their designs and methods and are based on the general premises of constructivist research (Polit & Beck, 2019; Guest et al., 2006).

In this study, data collection and analysis techniques were also highlighted, citing the strong use of semi-structured or focused interviews when researchers have broad topics or questions, and which need to be covered during the interview. Interviewers use a topic guide to ensure all areas of the issue are addressed. From this perspective, the interviewer's role is to encourage participants to speak freely about all the topics (Polit & Beck, 2019; Jordan, 2018; Martino et al., 2020; Peruzzo, 2017).

As for the subjects of qualitative research, nursing professionals are observed as the most-evident participants. Thus, some studies talk about not using research results with health professionals, causing a mismatch between scientific production in the area and the practices

conducted in the services, disarticulating between knowledge and doing. This issue is characterized by numerous studies, often funded, that do not contribute to improving the health system and work processes of professionals, thereby highlighting the importance of these studies (Paula et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Revoredo, 2015).

As for the number of participants in qualitative research, 11 to 20 were highlighted. The authors mentioned that works on ethnography, ethnoscience, and qualitative assessment should include between 30 and 50 participants (Guest et al., 2006; Harvey, 2000; Morse, 1994). In another perspective, the author defends the prerogative of the same number for studies on grounded theory (Creswell, 1998; Santos et al., 2018).

Phenomenological surveys have a maximum of 25 and a minimum of five participants; for research on life histories, 15 would be an acceptable minimum number (Bertaux, 1981; Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994). In summary, a consensual amount would be at least 20 to 30 participants for any type of qualitative research (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994). They also indicate at least 10 informants (Atran et al., 2005; Jordan, 2018).

Overall, most of the productions identified adopted an analysis framework with emphasis on Bardin and Minayo. Bardin has three phases: pre-analysis serves to select documents that will be analyzed in the scope of work; in the exploration of the material, the semantic criterion (significant) is used for coding and categorizing the content; the treatment of results is the interpretation phase (Bardin, 2011). Minayo talks about data classification in three stages: horizontal and exhaustive reading of information obtained in the interviews (underlining what is most important), transversal reading of the categories, and final analysis consisting of the interpretation of data categorized to obtain the result and reflect on the material obtained during the interviews (Minayo, 2017).

Thus, there is no exclusivity in the integration of qualitative research with a given theoretical framework, as observed in the theses and dissertations analyzed. Other references can be used with this method, such as Braun and Clarke, among others, which permit apprehending multiple interaction and association movements in a plural and complex reality (Silveira et al., 2015). Thus, qualitative research can be associated with different theoretical frameworks to reveal how authors want their analyses to be considered by readers, sustaining their worldview (Carnut et al., 2020).

Our findings converge with the study that highlights that methods evolve over time and change with the evolutionary pace and demands to which they adapt. We agree that qualitative is a method, analysis, conceptual framework, and model. It is also abstract, general, and specific (Ball et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The study evidenced the importance of using the qualitative approach in nursing, where it seeks to understand subjectivities and individualities of social situations, contributing to improve individualized and comprehensive care. It also emphasized the need to pay attention to the importance of choosing the theoretical framework as an aspect of analysis, which is adopted in different types of qualitative studies.

The findings prove the relevance of scientific production with the qualitative approach to the field of nursing, considering that this type of research seeks to understand subjectivities and individualities of social situations, contributing to improve individualized and comprehensive care, incorporating opinions, meanings, motivations, aspirations, beliefs, values, and attitudes related to the health of individuals and communities.

The limitations found during the development of the research center on debugging repositories, given that the theses and dissertations had to be analyzed one by one to verify whether they complied with the requirements established in the study.

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