Reviewer's report

Title: Iranian staff nurses' views of their productivity and human resource factors improving and impeding it: A Qualitative Study

Version: 1 Date: 4 August 2005

Reviewer: Judith Spiers

I enjoyed reading this well written report and have only concerns that I think are a matter of refining the paper.

• Major Compulsory Revisions (The author must respond to these before a decision on publication can be reached.)

1. The goal of the study was expressly to “highlight nurses’ perception of their own productivity and factors affecting it. It attempted to address questions such as ‘what is nurses’ perception of their own productivity?’” This is a major project which is essentially trying to elucidate the characteristics, attributes, preconditions and consequences of a poorly described concept from the perspective of the nurses themselves, rather than imposing a definition from economic or administrative theory. This is a credible and feasible objective. The background to the paper then presents an argument in the following logical reasoning

i. Nurses’ productivity is of great concern to improve quality and reduce costs.
ii. There is a lack of research on the phenomenon due to the difficulty in determining individual nurses’ productivity
iii. If productivity has been measured, it has been in terms of resources used, based on economic theories of productivity
iv. Generally, productivity is equated with efficiency although there are different definitions of productivity.

v. Therefore, to fill the gap of “what is nurses’ productivity from the perspective of the nurse?” it is reasonable to use a method that will seek an emic (i.e. the views of the nurses themselves) view as a first step in improving productivity.

However, in the entirety of this background information, other than suggesting productivity is equated with efficiency, no definition of the term is offered. This is a major oversight because the authors have noted that there are competing definitions from the various economic/administrative theories. These differing definitions need to described, identified, compared and contrasted and determined why they are unsatisfactory. For example, the authors cite a concept analysis which revealed the complexity of the concept yet entirely fail to indicate the description/definition these authors arrived at. This is important, because the authors appear to be making assumptions that both we, the reader, and the participants have the same kind of understanding of what productivity is--- an a priori assumption that is a grave threat to the validity of the study. The authors must let the reader know of the different perspectives in current knowledge and where they stand.

Additionally, without even some explicit guidelines or assumptions about what productivity is- or is not—there is a major danger of what is called “tunnel vision” (Morse et al, 2002) in which the analysts assume that everything they see or hear is applicable to the phenomenon under study. Therefore, I would recommend that the authors create a section called “theoretical and empirical approaches to productivity” and describe and define the theoretical approaches, their similarities and differences, and the gaps. Then, the authors should state their beginning assumptions.

2. When evaluating qualitative studies, I look for various features that an inductive approach to
knowledge formation was used: methodological coherence, adequate and appropriate sampling, including saturation and richness and emic voices of the participants represented. The methodological language is largely excellent, with some details that do need to be corrected to present this study as a rigorous inductive study.

a. The authors have used a generic approach to qualitative research: this is a controversial, although commonly used approach and the authors defend the rationale for its use well. However, given the generic approach, using the term "participants lived experience" (page 5. Para 2) is incongruous. The terms "lived experience" has become a cliché and largely meaningless. In my reading of the paper, I think a better term would be “emic or insider view”. The authors should then defend what they mean by nurses: are nurses clinicians, or/and managers and administrators such as head nurses, supervisors etc? Why are economic theories not applicable when using nurse managers, who presumably, are responsible for the administration of nursing services?

b. The language used to describe sampling procedures is incorrect: purposive sampling is the term used to describe sampling decisions made initially to guide choosing participants who would be experts in the phenomenon of interest. Theoretical sampling is the term used to pursue emerging themes. It is not clear why, if the goal was to elucidate clinicians' perspectives, why nurse managers, supervisors (i.e. administrative perspective) were included: the rationale for including nurse educators was specified. This needs to be done for the managers. It should be pointed out that the managers, educators etc are additional BUT DIFFERENT perspectives, so the core participant pool consists of 12 nurses. The authors claim that this was sufficient to attain saturation: I suspect that their definition of saturation differs from conventional approaches, and that their study describes broad/differing approaches to productivity, rather than one emic view: that of clinicians.

This may indeed be a greater achievement—it just needs to be clarified. My concern with saturation is that the authors initially define it correctly “no new categories emerging, but then fail to include the critical last part of the definition not matter how many new participants are recruited. This omission becomes clear when then researchers state that the participants were interviewed several times over a period of several months until the information from the interviews became repetitious: this is not data saturation, but participant saturation, in other words, the researcher cannot get any new information out of the existing participants. Saturation, on the other hand, is indicated when the data from all new participants is repetitious and redundant.

I would strongly recommend that the sample characteristics NOT be broken down in such detail as displayed in table 1. There is too much potential for academic and service nurses in Iran to work out who might have provided the quote, given that the hospital setting was specifically identified. The pertinent information, is the number in each position. The overall range of experience could be provided for the group as a whole, not for each position.

c. Results section: I am interested in looking here for a representation of the participants voices. This is difficult to determine, partly because of the mixture of clinicians and managers, because of the large number of categories presented and described without quotes, and because of the tendency to interpret the implications of the categories without specifying whether that interpretation comes from the participants, the authors, or the existing body of knowledge. For example, it is stated that nurses believe they use only a small percentage of their productivity because of non-nursing duties: these are never described. In an article that includes a large number of categories and subcategories, it is difficult to include quotes, however, I wonder if a table with each sub category, its description and a typical quote may help.

There is a difference in conventions regarding the linking of the present study’s results to the theoretical literature or not. I find it difficult to determine, in the results section, whether the authors are purely describing their participants views, or interpreting them in light of the literature. Including the literature: identifying common characteristics of productivity in the data and in the literature would seem to be a useful strategy, given the goal of the paper. It would also reduce redundancy in the discussion section.

Important categories are not identified by the percentage of agreement or response rate: this is a
quantitative approach. Themes are determined by their persistence throughout the data, within and between individuals. Please reconsider the use of percentages to represent views of productivity.

d. Discussion Section: although this section is well written, I found it laborious and boring to read as it is a list of authors/studies and their main findings in comparison to the present study. I feel that this section could be synthesized further. I would suggest avoidance of broad statements such as “Numerous studies also indicated the same results”

I would like to see some indication of differences between the clinician’s views and the managers/educators views. Adding a succinct definition of productivity as determined in this study in the first paragraph would provide a useful context for the ensuing discussion. I.e. “in this study, nurses described productivity as…….

• Minor Essential Revisions
The author can be trusted to make these. For example, missing labels on figures, the wrong use of a term, spelling mistakes.

3. The abstract states that the purpose of the researcher is to evaluate nurses; perception of productivity: this implies a judgment of the nurses’ rightness or wrongness in their perception which is not what I think they mean. I wonder if a better term might be to ‘explore nurses’ perceptions and experiences of productivity’

4. In general, the text is written extremely well: please go through the method and results section and chance all sentences to the past tense, or at least, ensure the tense is consistent. The tables contain major grammatical errors and need to be edited.
Please note that both the comments entered here and answers to the questions below constitute the report, bearing your name, that will be passed on to the authors and published on the website if the article is accepted.

Reference

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests as defined above. However, I am a member of the International Institute of Qualitative Methodology, University of Alberta, and as such do have an identifiable approach to qualitative research. This is the basis for most of my methodological comments.