

Being a Doctoral Candidate in Nursing: Reflecting on My Research Journey

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My doctoral study was indeed a journey—a journey of a thousand miles right from the beginning. I knew I wanted to conduct a qualitative study to get to understand the experiences of HIV positive adolescents. This idea came to mind after I had observed a neighbour's nephew whom I knew was on antiretroviral therapy (ART), but would be admitted to hospital every now and then. As the journey started, it was a very difficult journey for me. The initial struggle was to get ethical clearance for my research proposal. I remember I submitted about four or five times to my supervisors who at one time indicated that they were going to give up on me. I almost gave up as well, but the resilience in me pushed me to do better. Finally, the proposal was accepted with no corrections at all!

As I embarked on the tortuous road of scholarship, I realised that the qualitative method I had chosen required me to do a lot of intensive reading. Afterwards, I wrote a section on phenomenology which I thought was well-written. When the paper came back from my supervisors, I was devastated by their comments. I gave myself a month's break. I picked myself up, read extensively about phenomenology, and in my readings I kept coming across the name "Wertz." I said to myself, let me look for the contact details of this guru in phenomenology and write to him. Not only did he respond—he sent me a copy of one of his books (Wertz et al. 2011; see also Wertz 2005) and indicated that I could always consult him if I had challenges with phenomenology.

I was excited; my journey continued. The journey was truly in motion. I began to focus in earnest on all the comments from my supervisors. I was now enjoying my studies. As I wrote the chapters, I had to articulate my ideas very soundly and they needed to be well-researched. I came to appreciate that phenomenological research goes nowhere without thoughtful writing. I became aware that only by writing can one construct knowledge and in constructing knowledge, we come to write in a more profound manner. This made me realise that the more I wanted to understand my topic, the more I had to read and write!



Africa Journal of Nursing and Midwifery
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/AJNM/index>
Volume 22 | Number 1 | 2020 | #7595 | 3 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2520-5293/7595>
ISSN 2520-5293 (Online)
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Soon I found myself interviewing research participants. The major learning experience in this phase was how emotional an interview could get. I had in no way anticipated how emotionally involving some of the interviews could become; it was like a reality shock. On a number of occasions, I experienced severe emotional reactions. I was often torn between being a researcher and a counsellor, and was sometimes in danger of being carried away by the participants' stories of pain and suffering. This was a true test of scholarship—in no way intended for the fainthearted! I had to learn to deal with severe emotional reactions, especially when an interviewee broke down and cried loudly and endlessly. On three occasions, I caught myself almost being carried away; I nearly cried and my eyes were teary. After the interviews, it became apparent to me that phenomenological research can truly be an emotionally draining event. While I had a gut feeling that this might happen, the extent of the reactions to some of the participants' stories, especially the emotional weight this levied on me, was unimaginable. Indeed, a journey of a thousand miles had begun.

As I inched forward with the research journey, I experienced yet another surprise during the data analysis phase. Despite having all the transcribed data with me, I was surprised by the fact that I spent nearly four (4) months dwelling on the data of 13 adolescents almost on a daily basis. This level of immersion was totally new to me; it appeared to have no end. Occasionally the feeling that the analysis was moving nowhere would envelop me. Sometimes I wondered, am I really doing the right thing? Despite the apparent stagnation, my supervisors were very encouraging. I began to wonder, is there something wrong with me? I recollected that my frustration was in part because I had imagined that once I had gathered the data, data analysis would be a walk in the park! This later turned out to be a terrible assumption to say the least, because this stage proved to be the most time-consuming. How wrong a young researcher like me could be! As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, every day, I would sit behind my laptop typing away, constantly reading and rereading, copying, cutting, pasting, accepting changes, and deleting, almost incessantly. I would ask, why am I not making progress? Then, suddenly, the cloud of despair vanished, and everything seemed to flow without much hassle after the themes and categories and subcategories became clear. I started to enjoy myself, especially as I wrote the results chapter. I soon discovered that I had more data to support my themes and categories than I needed. This apparent abundance of information overwhelmed me—so much information was suddenly available to tell adolescents' stories. This was completely surprising! The ending became even more enjoyable, because with my supervisors' suggestions each time I submitted a chapter was easier than the last. Finally, the thesis was completed!

References

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