Article

Generic Qualitative Approaches: Pitfalls and Benefits of Methodological Mixology

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Abstract

Generic qualitative research studies are those that refuse to claim allegiance to a single established methodology. There has been significant debate in the qualitative literature regarding the extent to which rigour can be preserved outside of the guidelines of an established methodology. This article offers a starting place for researchers interested in entering the literature on generic qualitative approaches and offers some guidance to help researchers appreciate the advantages of using a generic approach and navigate the potential pitfalls. Given that generic approaches are, by definition, less defined and established, this article begins by defining generic qualitative approaches, including the descriptive qualitative approach and interpretive description subcategories. It then outlines key critiques of generic studies present in the literature, describes the benefits of generic approaches, and suggests ways in which the issues raised in critiques might be mediated.

Keywords: methodology, qualitative methods, generic qualitative, basic qualitative, interpretive description, descriptive qualitative, rigour

As qualitative research has evolved, researchers in the field have struggled with a persistent tension between a need for both methodological flexibility and structure (Holloway & Todres, 2003). In the development of qualitative research, three major methodologies are discussed most frequently and are often viewed as foundational: phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory (Holloway & Todres, 2003; Johnson, Long, & White, 2001; Morse, 1989; Richards & Morse, 2007; Smith, Becker, & Cheater, 2011). Since these methodologies have appeared on the landscape, "newer" methodologies such as discourse analysis, life history, and narrative inquiry have been defined and largely accepted within qualitative research communities.

Within these established methodologies researchers discuss the degree of deviance from methodological rules and guidelines that is acceptable; however, there is also increasing debate around research genres and studies that do not fit within established methodologies (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003). One research approach that falls under this broad category is known as *generic qualitative* research, which is subsequently subdivided into genres of *interpretive description* and *descriptive qualitative* research (Caelli et al., 2003). Often, researchers find themselves with research questions that do not fit neatly within the confines of a single established methodology; generic studies offer an opportunity for researchers to play with these boundaries, use the tools that established methodologies offer, and develop research designs that fit their epistemological stance, discipline, and particular research questions.

Since these approaches fall outside—or in between—traditional boundaries, their (re)appearance has invigorated debates around what constitutes rigour in qualitative research, and how rigour might be implemented outside of methodology-specific criteria. In addition to reopening and enhancing debates about method, rigour, and methodological orthodoxy, generic methods offer researchers tools that are useful in their own right. Generic methods provide one space where researchers can play and make advances by deviating from methodological prescriptions, remaking existing methodologies and building approaches that may or may not become new methodologies.

This article offers researchers—particularly those who are new to generic approaches—a point of entry into this debate. Because the boundaries of generic approaches are, by definition, less well defined and established, I begin by first describing what constitutes a generic approach. Second, as the title of this article suggests, I will offer guidelines for recognizing and navigating the potential pitfalls often encountered when conducting a generic study. Third, I will discuss the benefits of generic methods and the cases and spaces in which those benefits outweigh the challenges. Finally, I will offer some recommendations for avoiding the pitfalls and for building rigorous and methodologically sophisticated studies using a generic qualitative approach.

Defining Generic Qualitative Research

Because generic qualitative approaches are, by definition, not bounded or defined strictly enough to be called methodologies, I will refer to studies that fall under this category as generic qualitative approaches. Also because of this intrinsic lack of definition, it is often difficult to define what constitutes a generic approach. This article begins by placing boundaries around what does—and does not—qualify as a generic qualitative approach, including two sub-categories falling under the generic qualitative banner—the descriptive qualitative approach and interpretive description. Following a brief discussion of each of these approaches, I outline some of the key elements in the research design of each one. In relating these design elements, I use Crotty's (1998) much-quoted framework for articulating research design through a common structure and language. He has proposed four elements of a well-designed research framework and argued that well-designed research demonstrates congruence and interlinking between all four elements.

These four elements are: (a) epistemology, or broad assumptions about the nature of knowledge; (b) theoretical framework, or philosophical stance; (c) methodology, or the broad research strategy; and (d) methods, or the particular "techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3).

The Generic Qualitative Approach

The generic qualitative approach—also called basic qualitative or, simply, interpretive—can stand alone as a researcher's articulated approach (Merriam, 2009). The definition of a generic qualitative study is clearest when it is defined in the negative: it is research that "is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known [or more established] qualitative methodologies" (Caelli et al., 2003, p. 4), such as the "big three"—phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography (Richards & Morse, 2007). Caelli et al. (2003) have suggested that this can mean either that generic studies blend established methodological approaches in order to create something new or that they claim no formal methodological framework at all. Studies that use elements of more than one established methodology can work well as generic studies when compatible elements are blended into a single new methodology. However, when methodologies are combined and the distinctiveness of each established methodology is retained, the study will often fit better under categories of mixed or multiple method studies, rather than generic studies. When not constructed through mixed or multiple method structures, these studies may become incoherent and often invite charges of "method-slurring"—a critique of generic studies that will be discussed below. Caelli et al.'s (2003) second suggestion—that generic studies "claim no particular methodological viewpoint at all" (p. 4)—is likewise problematic. Research can never be designed on a blank slate; rather, it always draws on and builds on the traditions and ideas that came before it, even if that lineage is unarticulated (Crotty, 1998).

Rather, as others have before (Lim, 2011; Litchman, 2010; Merriam, 2002), it might be useful to view generic studies broadly as studies that intentionally refuse to claim full allegiance to any one established methodology. Instead, researchers may choose to draw on a single established methodology, but deviate from its intent, rules, or guidelines in a way that they see as beneficial to the study. For example, within a generic qualitative study, researchers could strive to examine a process similar to what might be expected in grounded theory, but without attempting to derive a substantive theory, a characteristic that makes grounded theory distinctive as a methodology (Lim, 2011). Generic studies may also blend congruent tools and techniques from more than one established methodology; these studies risk the charge of "method-slurring," but can work well if sufficient care is taken to ensure congruence at all levels of the research framework. Overall, generic studies walk a tricky but creative line between borrowing and making, "prescriptiveness and flexibility" (Thorne, Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004, p. 8). By borrowing "textures" or "overtones" at epistemological and theoretical levels (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen, & Sondergaard, 2009), or techniques and procedures at the method-level (Hunt, 2009; Thorne et al., 2004), generic qualitative studies can draw on the strengths of established methodologies while maintaining the flexibility that makes generic approaches attractive to researchers whose studies do not fall neatly within a particular established methodology.

Research design.

In terms of identifying unifying design features of the generic qualitative approach, Merriam (2002) has suggested that, like all qualitative research, generic studies seek to understand how people interpret, construct, or make meaning from their world and their experiences. Furthermore, she writes that generic studies are epistemologically social constructivist, theoretically

interpretive studies that focus on "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). As discussed above, generic studies draw on one or more established methodologies to build a research design "from the ground up." According to Lim (2011), these studies aim at a rich description of the phenomenon under investigation. This means that the methods within generic qualitative approaches are generally "highly inductive; the use of open codes, categories, and thematic analysis are most common" (Lim, 2011, p. 52).

Qualitative Description

Sandelowski (2000), a champion of the descriptive qualitative approach, related that qualitative description is not a "new" approach: "the method [or methodology, in Crotty's terms] already exists but is relatively unacknowledged, as opposed to being a new, distinctively nursing adaptation" (p. 335). Qualitative description is defined as research designed to produce a low-inference description of a phenomenon (Sandelowski, 2000). Although Sandelowski maintains that all research involves interpretation, she has also suggested that qualitative description attempts to minimize inferences made in order to remain "closer" to the original data (Neergaard et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2000, 2010). According to Sandelowski (2000),

> researchers conducting such studies seek descriptive validity, or an accurate accounting of events that most people (including researchers and participants) observing the same event would agree is accurate, and interpretive validity, or an accurate accounting of the meanings participants attributed to those events that those participants would agree is accurate. (p. 36)

Research design.

On an epistemological level, Sandelowski (2010) has implied a constructivist epistemology in that the attempt to approach individuals' interpretations of experiences is always mediated by researcher interpretations. On the level of theoretical perspective, qualitative description professes to be the least theory-driven of all methodologies (Neergaard et al., 2009), though Sandelowski (2010) has admitted that no research can ever be theory or value-free. Sandelowski (2010) has written that "naturalism [is] the typical theoretical foundation for qualitative descriptive studies," and defined it as "entailing a commitment to studying a phenomenon in a manner as free of artifice as possible in the artifice-laden enterprise known as conducting research" (Sandelowski, 2010, p. 79).

On the level of methods, this approach can utilize any sampling technique, but it most often involves maximum variation sampling in order to obtain "broad insight" into the phenomenon being described (Neergaard et al., 2009). Data is generally collected through semi-structured interviews or focus groups (Neergaard et al., 2009), though other sources of data such as documents may be used. Data are commonly analysed concurrently—while data are still being collected—using content analysis as an analytic strategy (Neergaard et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2000). In an effort to remain "close to the data," researchers using the descriptive qualitative approach most often use codes generated from the data (Sandelowski, 2000), including in vivo codes—codes that use language drawn directly from the data. Findings are then presented in "everyday" language (Neergaard et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2000). Neergaard et al. (2009) have suggested that qualitative description may be particularly useful in mixed methods approaches because of its claim to descriptive breadth, which parallels and blends well with quantitative methods.

Interpretive Description

Interpretive description was developed by Thorne and her colleagues (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald, 1997) in order to meet a need in nursing research for a pragmatic and highly contextualized qualitative approach that would draw on experience and evidence from clinical practice, and translate easily back into the practice setting (Hunt, 2009; Thorne et al., 1997; Thorne et al., 2004). Although this approach was developed with the needs of nurse researchers in mind (Thorne, 2008), it has applications across disciplines that are closely linked to practice settings (Hunt, 2009), including those in other health science disciplines and education. Thorne (2008) has strived to position interpretive description as a methodological framework that will bridge the theory-practice divide. Interpretive description focuses on developing research questions from practice and providing theoretically and methodologically sound evidence that can then be used in the practice setting (Thorne, 2008). According to Thorne et al. (2004), "researchers [using interpretive description] seek understandings of clinical phenomena that illuminate their characteristics, patterns, and structure in some theoretically useful manner" (p. 3).

Research design.

Like qualitative description, interpretive description is built—though perhaps more explicitly—on constructivist epistemological assumptions. In this methodology knowledge is not absolute, but is "'socially constructed' through the subjective person who experiences it" (Thorne, 2008, p. 49). As its name suggests, interpretive description takes a broad, interpretive, and naturalistic theoretical perspective (Thorne et al., 2004). However, Thorne (2008) has cautioned against the use of a priori theory that is selected in advance of data collection and used as a prescription for understanding the data. Instead, she has suggested that researchers use language and references to "cue" their audience as to their disciplinary and theoretical location. Researchers may draw on various theoretical perspectives, but need not declare allegiance to any one theory (Thorne, 2008).

At the level of research methods, interpretive description blends and borrows from many earlier methodologies, including grounded theory, naturalistic inquiry, and phenomenology (Thorne, 2008). Interpretive description encourages data collection and triangulation through multiple sources (Hunt, 2009; Thorne et al., 1997), although individual interviews are often the primary source of data (Hunt, 2009). Data analysis employs concurrent, constant comparative methods—iterative methods that attempt to generate a broad understanding of the data, rather than a detailed line-by-line understanding of minutiae (Hunt, 2009; Thorne et al., 1997). These analyses "serve to locate the findings within the framework of the existing body of knowledge (in whatever form that might take) and in locating explanatory factors that might arise from the analysis within that larger perspective" (Thorne et al., 2004, p. 4). Research reports and products should relate directly to applications in the practice setting (Hunt, 2009; Thorne et al., 1997, 2004).

Design Implications

Though this section has offered some parameters and articulated some of the major design characteristics of the above three generic approaches, generic studies remain intentionally ill-defined. This lack of a methodological rulebook (with the possible exception of Thorne, 2008) creates opportunities for researchers asking questions and conducting studies that do not fit neatly into an established methodology; however, several potential pitfalls arise because of this lack of definition. I will address these in the next section.

Challenges to Generic Qualitative Approaches

Several major critiques have been levelled against generic qualitative approaches. These criticisms centre on a robust and long standing debate about what constitutes rigour in qualitative research. All of these critiques have in common a concern about ensuring congruence throughout epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and technical/methods levels of the research framework. I have grouped these critiques under three broad categories:

- critics argue that a refusal to adopt an established methodology makes for atheoretical research (Neergaard et al., 2009);
- critics see generic qualitative approaches as lacking a robust critical literature that would refine these approaches and offer guidance to researchers (Caelli et al., 2003; Hunt, 2009; Neergaard et al., 2009); and
- critics argue that "mixing" elements of established methodologies can lead to contradictions between all elements of the research framework.

These critiques mark out potential pitfalls for researchers using generic approaches. While researchers employing a generic approach should take these critiques seriously, they are not unavoidable. In the sections below, I address each critique individually and relate counter arguments that appear in the literature.

Issue 1: The Theoretical Void

The first charge against generic qualitative research is that, because epistemological and theoretical allegiances are not necessarily prescribed by the methodology, these aspects of the research framework are often poorly articulated and poorly thought through. According to Atkinson and Delamont (2006), generic qualitative research does "little to acknowledge the intellectual traditions that frame such research, and obscure[s] rather than illuminate[s] the epistemological foundations of qualitative work" (p. 752). Likewise, Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, and Gildersleeve (2012) have stated that descriptions of generic qualitative methods in the context of higher education journals lack complexity:

> We contend that such reductive and generic conceptions of qualitative research reflect the broader state of the field of qualitative research in higher education, one that does not engage deeply with philosophical assumptions that differentiate knowledge regimes, paradigms, or frameworks for their ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological claims. The absence of explicit discussions concerning researcher ways of knowing can reify dominant research paradigms as providing authoritative and deterministic truths. (p. 20)

This harsh criticism rings true in many cases. Unlike many established qualitative methodologies, generic approaches do not articulate a consistent set of theoretical assumptions. Phenomenology, for example, is tied to a particular body of theory (Crotty, 1998), with longstanding and well-articulated theoretical debates that define the range of theoretical stances that a researcher can occupy within that methodology. This theoretical debate invites researchers to "take sides" and locate themselves theoretically. Thus, without that debate, researchers using generic approaches are left to read widely and locate themselves within the broad theoretical stance of interpretivism.

Counter arguments.

A number of arguments to counter the charge that generic qualitative approaches are "atheoretical" have been brought forth in the literature. First, although some generic qualitative methods do claim to be less theory driven (Sandelowski, 2000), they are not atheoretical. In all three generic approaches, there is a call for attentiveness to the linkages between the research questions, the methodological choices, and the research methods. Merriam (2009) and Thorne (2008) have discussed the ways in which interpretivism frames the theoretical perspective of generic studies; they also leave space for individual researchers to take up theoretical frameworks that make sense in the context of the research questions and design of individual research projects. Sandelowski (2010) has claimed naturalism as a loose theoretical perspective and has engaged in a conversation about the extent to which it is possible for researchers in the constructivist paradigm to favour description over interpretation. This conversation itself is a theoretical one. All three of these approaches are actively engaged in questions of congruence in research design, and in actively negotiating the ways in which the theoretical and epistemological positioning of the researcher is interlinked with other aspects of the research design. Researchers using generic approaches are forced to make choices about how and to what extent theoretical perspectives will inform their work because there is no a priori theory or pre-packaged theoretical perspective that "comes with" these methodological approaches.

Second, many scholars have argued that methodologists who insist that research must fit within an established methodology are engaging in "methodolatry." "Methodolatrous" methodologists are criticised for their unnecessary and stifling adherence to methodological prescriptions (Atkinson, 2005; Chamberlain, 2000; Holloway & Todres, 2003; Johnson et al., 2001; Sandelowski, 2000). This insistence on the use of a single established methodology rests on an assumption that there can be an original, essential, or true methodology. This claim is necessarily a false one. All methodologies are historical constructs with histories of change, theoretical divisions, and debate (Chamberlain, 2000; Delamont, Coffey, & Atkinson, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Holloway & Todres, 2003; Johnson et al., 2001; Sandelowski, 2000). According to Sandelowski (2010), "there can be no execution of any method that perfectly conforms to any textbook depiction of it. Indeed, there is no it; there is no bounded entity constituting a pure method" (p. 78). As an example, Holloway & Todres (2003) discussed the dissensus and subsequent rift within grounded theory into Glaserian, Strausserian, and later, Charmazian schools. Established methodologies, they argued, should not be treated as stable or pure entities but as historical, shifting, and discursively produced concepts that are taken up by researchers in a variety of ways. Despite the radical shift in grounded theory epistemology—from the post-positivism of the Glaserian school to the constructivism of Charmaz's work (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory can hardly be called atheoretical. In fact, Charmaz's efforts to work outside of the traditional boundaries of grounded theory has, I would argue, significantly enhanced debates about the epistemological and theoretical assumptions behind grounded theory, often demanding that the implicit be made explicit. Likewise, the deviations and changes made under the banner of the generic qualitative have the potential to enhance these debates.

Issue 2: Lack of a Robust Literature/Quality Debate

The critique that generic qualitative approaches lack a robust critical literature is linked to the above critique that they are atheoretical. Such critiques have suggested that a robust critical literature, built by a large and longstanding methodological research community, is crucial to the development of any research framework (Hunt, 2009; Thorne et al., 2004). According to Atkinson and Delamont (2006), "the recent search for novelty [and new generic approaches] has

resulted in a misleadingly shallow history of the methods and of the substantive literature it generates" (p. 750).

Critics have argued that in the absence of a robust methodological literature, issues of congruence in the research design may arise within and between elements of the research framework. As I have suggested, a failure to understand and articulate epistemological and theoretical foundations of the research framework has implications in terms of research quality. As Crotty (1998) has suggested, this failure can result in incommensurability between elements within research and contradictions inherent in the results. For example, a generic study employing narrative inquiry techniques that ignores the constructivist roots of narrative inquiry may be in danger of analysing and reporting narrative experiences as objective results. Moreover, failure on the part of the researcher to effectively identify his or her own epistemological and theoretical stance can lead to unacknowledged bias in the research approach and findings. The literature on narrative inquiry offers guidance to researchers at each level of the research framework, through design, data collection, analysis, and writing. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) offered an early guidebook on narrative inquiry, but there have been many subsequent guidebooks and debates offering various perspectives and advice. The dearth of literature on generic approaches certainly forces researchers to seek out, think through, and draw on a wide range of sources in order to define research methods. For neophyte researchers in particular, it might be challenging to consider all of the implications of method and procedure choice (Morse, 1989).

Counter arguments.

There is a pragmatic claim that established methodologies are "harder to do" because they require a rich knowledge of the appropriate methodological literature. Ironically, this claim is often used as a rationale *for* the use of generic methods by graduate students or other neophyte researchers (e.g., Caelli et al., 2003). However, this claim does not do justice to the intricate methodological knowledge required of researchers using generic approaches; generic studies require researchers to know the methodologies (sometimes more than one) that they draw on well enough to not only apply that methodology to context but also to manipulate and blend methodologies, as well as to justify the choices made in the relative absence of existing arguments. As a result, individual researchers employing generic qualitative approaches are challenged to read and think broadly about their work.

Furthermore, this "thinking through" process, particularly with the guidance of a research supervisor or mentor, is extremely valuable in any researcher's development and leads to sophisticated methodological knowledge and work. At the epistemological and theoretical levels, overreliance on methodological rules and assumptions can actually hinder a thorough thinking-through of researcher assumptions and choices at all levels (Chamberlain, 2000). Proponents of generic qualitative approaches have argued that research choices, including that of methodology and methods, should be informed by the research questions, and not the other way around (Annells, 2006; Caelli et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2001; Thorne, 1991; Thorne et al., 2004). Overreliance on methodological strictures "often presumes, or more often ignores, issues surrounding the philosophical position of the researcher: issues of where one stands in relation to ontology and epistemology" (Chamberlain, 2000, p. 293).

Issue 3: Method Slurring

When the pejorative charge of "method slurring" is levelled against generic qualitative approaches, it rests on the assumption that these approaches are, to a large extent, a mix of established methodologies, which as I have argued is not always the case. One of the earliest and

most often cited critiques of methodological mixology comes from Morse (1989), who wrote: "such mixing, while certainly 'do-able,' violates the assumptions of data collection techniques and methods of analysis of all the methods used. The product is not good science; the product is a sloppy mishmash" (p. 4). This "sloppy mishmash" is often bemoaned in the literature when philosophically incompatible methodologies are "borrowed from" or combined (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Caelli et al., 2003; Holloway & Todres, 2003; Johnson et al., 2001; Thorne et al., 2004). Two interesting cases have appeared in the literature to showcase some of the main critiques of method slurring. Both researchers claimed that a single established methodology is insufficient or inappropriate for capturing the phenomenon; however, both cases also raise concerns about issues of congruence. The following section will engage these cases as they relate to issues of congruence when studies—whether or not they call themselves generic qualitative— attempt to blend established methodologies.

Case 1: Epistemological and theoretical congruence.

The first case involves the blending of two very different methodologies at the outset of a research project, and it raises potential issues of congruence at epistemological and theoretical levels. This case centred around the researcher's desire to design a study "not only to develop a substantive grounded theory focusing on nurse-patient actions and interaction, but also to inquire about possible meanings of the experience to give broader understanding of an existential nature" (Annells, 2006, p. 56) through hermeneutic phenomenology. The researcher also expressed a desire to use these two methods together in order to achieve "methodological triangulation." Annells (2006) related the methodological segregation undertaken within the study through data collection, coding, and analysis that occurred. Although this research story does not qualify as "sloppy," it does raise concerns regarding the compatibility of the epistemological assumptions behind each methodology.

As Baker et al. (1992) noted, grounded theory and phenomenology are very different methodologies with respect to research purpose, the role of previous knowledge and the researcher, the sources of data used, sampling techniques employed, data collection and analysis strategies, and validity criteria. Whereas the technical aspects, such as sampling and analysis, may be dealt with through segregation of methodologies, questions still emerge regarding the congruence of these two methodologies, particularly with respect to their epistemological and ontological assumptions. Phenomenology seeks to temporarily bracket the researcher's experience (Baker et al., 1992) in order to access the *subjective* experience of participants (Richards & Morse, 2007). The traditional grounded theory used in this study, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), assumes that there is a degree of objective truth that can be accessed by the researcher (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). At a minimum, careful consideration with respect to epistemological congruence of these two methodologies is required.

Case 2: Congruence in methods and techniques.

In the second case, the approach to blending methodologies created issues of congruence at all levels of the research framework, though this case particularly demonstrates potential issues of congruence in techniques and procedures. Here, the researcher argued that she was compelled by the data to change and mix her methodological approaches (Bryant & Lasky, 2007); during a grounded theory study, "a 'story' presented by one participant was so compelling and original that just to 'code' the interview transcript would have seemed a travesty" (p. 182). The researcher then chose to mix narrative inquiry with her original grounded theory approach in order to represent the "individual voice" within the story. As in the previous example, the researcher attempted to complete two research objectives simultaneously, using two distinct methodologies,

thus raising questions, acknowledged by the researcher, about compatibility within a single study. Grounded theory assumptions—involving a process of "breaking down" data into units of meaning in order to find commonalities and differences within the research population (Charmaz, 2006)—are altered mid-stream, creating contradictions between grounded theory's overarching attempt to build theory generated from a broad theoretical sample and the narrative inquiry effort to represent each participant's "voice" on an individual level. Despite Bryant and Lasky's (2007) attempts to reconcile epistemological differences and differences in research purpose, questions about whether, in the end, both purposes can be achieved in a single study remain.

Moreover, this example raises questions about the congruence of data collection strategies within the methodologies claimed. Research questions, sampling, and interviewing techniques built for a grounded theory study may well create issues in data analysis that uses narrative techniques. Likewise, narrative analyses may conflict with grounded theory analyses. The length and structure of a grounded theory interview may not provide sufficient data to conduct a narrative inquiry, particularly one grounded in a single case. Furthermore, constructing a grounded theory that represents the data set as a whole may not be achievable when one interview is analyzed differently. This interview might be easily overrepresented in the study as a whole, but also underrepresented in grounded theory development by virtue of having been, to some extent, set apart from the data set. These questions are significant ones; whether or not they can be addressed sufficiently by the researcher in this case study, they do point to potential issues in combining distinct methodologies.

Counter arguments.

Method slurring can create issues of congruence, particularly when the research framework fails to account for the epistemological perspective of the researcher and the methodology, or when research questions lack cohesion and fail to provide structure to the research framework. However, both of the cases cited above also point to an insufficiency in established methodologies and raise important questions about the necessity of building something new. Rather than starting with two or more established methodologies, and attempting to "mash" them together, generic qualitative approaches may alleviate issues of congruence in a hybrid study by intentionally building a new generic research framework, including epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. The researcher then selects approaches that will work together to answer the research questions, rather than starting with an attempt to reconcile different methodologies already in existence. During this building process, researchers may find that some research objectives may be incompatible, requiring separate studies; they may also find new and unique ways of drawing from the toolkits of one or more established methodologies in order to build something new.

Advantages to Generic Approaches

Established methodologies have not outgrown their usefulness. They offer an excellent fit for many studies and, for generic studies, offer robust literatures with important methodological debates that have led to the development of many useful tools that researchers using generic approaches draw on and weave into our own work. However, there is a need to overcome some of the restrictions caused by overreliance on established methodologies in qualitative research. Researchers who alter existing methodologies or who create new ones stimulate much-needed conversations that challenge methodological rules; these conversations help to retain a critical edge and a need to defend choices made even within established qualitative methodologies.

In addition to stimulating methodological debates, generic approaches have several advantages in their own right. According to Lim (2011),

> this tendency [toward flexible methodological approaches] is natural and even inevitable for those conducting their research on a topic or in an area where few theories or empirical studies have been available. … However, even when a significant amount of research literature and theories are available in their field, some researchers still find merit in the generic qualitative. (p. 53)

First, Lim (2011) has pointed to the need to develop new methodologies to fit new fields and to support research using new theoretical perspectives. Second, Lim's (2011) statement that even researchers working in well-researched areas may "find merit in the generic qualitative" (p. 53) suggests that many interesting questions in well-researched areas may take a new angle, or ask questions in a new way. Both points raised by Lim (2011) point toward a need for the flexibility of generic qualitative approaches, and this will be taken up in-depth below.

Advancing Theory – Opening New Ground

In both new and well-researched areas, there are potentially unlimited theoretical perspectives, or ways of approaching and understanding a research area. Many established methodologies come packaged with a particular theoretical background. If researchers are to think in new ways or examine new things, then it becomes necessary to work outside of existing methodologies in order to support new theoretical approaches. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) famously called for a theoretical "seventh moment" in qualitative research, where "the move is toward pluralism, and many social scientists now recognize that no picture is every complete – that we need to employ many perspectives, hear many voices, before we can achieve deep understandings of social phenomena" (p. 1054). Research in the "seventh moment" is flexible in order to adapt to new kinds of knowledge and theory and to respond to the needs of researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this space, new theoretical frameworks might be built, challenging methodological orthodoxies around what constitutes "theoretical" and what is named as "atheoretical." Within this call for flexible, responsive, situated research, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have placed the researcher in the position of bricoleur, a research artist capable of playing within and without a methodology in order to adapt to meet research needs and to build new genres. In Sandelowski's (1993) words,

> we can preserve or kill the spirit of qualitative work; we can soften our notion of rigor to include the playfulness, soulfulness, imagination, and technique we associate with more artistic endeavors, or we can further harden it by the uncritical application of rules. (p. 8)

This "playfulness" allows for new methodological approaches designed to support new fields of research, new theoretical perspectives, new questions, or new approaches to old research problems.

Asking New Questions – Articulating New Approaches

As I have suggested, researchers often find that established methodologies provide an awkward fit for many studies. Particularly in well-researched areas, novel and interesting questions arise in the "in-between" methodological spaces that have yet to be explored. These questions do not appear neatly as a "grounded theory question" or a "phenomenology question"; rather, as proponents of generic approaches argue, these questions can and should drive the methodology, rather than the other way around (Annells, 2006; Caelli et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2001; Thorne,

1991; Thorne et al., 2004). Given the quantity and breadth of potential questions, it seems naïve to think that current established methodologies might be able to account for every possible question, even in well-researched areas. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have suggested, "no picture is ever complete" (p. 1054), and working outside of established methodologies offers a way to open up space for new angles and new types of questions.

Nonetheless, many researchers often feel compelled to choose from among established methodologies, despite an imperfect fit (Annells, 2006; Caelli et al., 2003; Hunt, 2009; Sandelowski, 2000; Thorne et al., 2004). These studies are characterized by a "hollow allegiance" to the methodology that they claim (Thorne et al., 1997). The methodology claimed may not fit either the beliefs of the researchers or the research questions, offering insufficient resources for answering these questions. Thus researchers are forced to create a new methodological approach while continuing to claim that they are adhering to an existing methodology. In Sandelowski's (2000) words, "a confusing state of affairs exists whereby studies are called narrative, even though they may include nothing more than minimally structured, open-ended interviews; phenomenologic, even though they may include nothing more than reports of the 'subjective' experiences of participants" (p. 334). Researchers, particularly those who are new to research, may find themselves grasping for an elusive methodology that will offer a perfect fit for their complex research questions, but they will often find that they come up short.

Given that, in many cases, a single established methodology will never offer a perfect solution for exploring new questions that, in fact, lie in-between methodologies, researchers caught in this dilemma are left with two choices. We can claim a "hollow allegiance" in order to satisfy those who think that claiming an established methodology is necessary. Alternatively, we can begin with the difficult but productive work of building a research framework of our own and asking important questions about how various aspects of the research framework will interlock in order to offer a congruent design that will answer novel research questions and open new ground. However, given the challenges of generic approaches recounted above, researchers engaging in such innovation must be vigilant in ensuring that their work and choices are theoretically and methodologically rigorous. Based on this analysis of the literature on generic qualitative methodologies, in the next section I put forth several recommendations for rigorous and effective use of generic qualitative approaches.

Avoiding the Pitfalls: Engaging Effectively with Generic Approaches

First, concerns regarding congruence and the researcher's epistemological and theoretical self-awareness in any study should be taken seriously. However, as I have suggested, these concerns can be addressed through a clear thinking-through and justification of research choices and linkages within the study. Research frameworks like Crotty's (1998) offer a structure for thinking through these choices and linkages; they emphasise the importance of clarity and congruence from the epistemological and theoretical levels of research all the way into the "trenches," where specific tools and techniques are selected to actually do the research tasks. Researchers must, as in all methodologies, be reflexive, particularly in defining the boundaries of the study and considering ethical implications of research outside of a defined methodological debate. As suggested by Johnson et al. (2001), these justifications and linkages can be articulated through an audit trail so that editors and researchers seeking to critique or build on a particular research framework have a clear picture of both the research framework and the decision-making process.

Second, the qualitative research community and researchers with a specific interest in generic qualitative approaches will benefit from continued scholarly conversations and development of broad criteria for rigour that apply across qualitative research genres. Tracy's (2010) "'big-tent'

criteria for excellent qualitative research" may be useful in this regard. She has suggested that in developing excellent qualitative research and in evaluating qualitative research across methodologies, researchers should focus on the "ends" rather than becoming bogged down in the minutiae of methodology-bound "means." Researchers working outside of established methodologies can use these broad criteria to build their work; criteria designed to cross methodological boundaries may also help to build a critical community for research in the "seventh moment."

Finally, I was struck by a concern brought forward in Morse (1989) and reiterated in Thorne et al. (2004). Morse (1989) suggested that working outside of established methodologies and challenging methodological boundaries is not "safe" for neophyte researchers. As I have mentioned, without the benefit of experience, new researchers will be challenged to consider the many implications that arise when they flex or challenge methodological boundaries. However, this issue can be meditated through: careful consideration of all the elements of the research framework, the guidance of an experienced supervisor or mentor, and wide reading about qualitative methodological debates broadly and, in particular, the methodologies that the study is "borrowing" from. Even for experienced researchers, a time-honored tool for rigorous research lies in conversation and collaboration with colleagues; these on-campus and online research communities invite questions from new contexts and may be the most important tool available to researchers working with any methodological approach.

All of these tools have long existed in the literature and have been the centre of rich debate. Use of existing language for building a research framework addresses issues of congruence; criteria for rigour across genres such as Tracy's (2010)—although there are many others—address the need for criteria for quality and a robust debate on rigour that can be applied outside of established methodologies. Research communities—however and wherever they arise—offer guidance and support throughout the process of developing and enacting research frameworks. These tools, when used reflexively, address the challenges encountered when using generic approaches and make generic approaches an attractive option for researchers who find themselves outside of established methodologies.

Summary

Advocates for generic qualitative approaches have stimulated significant debate regarding the rigour of research claiming to take place outside of established methodological boundaries. However, several valid concerns are raised in the literature, largely centring on issues of congruence in research design. As I have argued, these cautions should be taken seriously by anyone considering a generic qualitative research approach. However, advocates of generic approaches have also clearly demonstrated that the need for innovation and adaptation in methodologies to fit the researcher, the discipline, and the questions proposed outweighs the difficulties in conducting generic studies. Calls for a "seventh moment" in qualitative research suggest that there will always be a need to develop new theoretical perspectives and to find new ways of looking at "old" topics. For many researchers, generic approaches can offer a space within which to become bricoleurs, where we can take up questions and explore approaches that do not fit neatly into established methodological boundaries. Generic approaches also offer space where we might begin to develop new methodologies, and where we engage in discussions of rigour that cross disciplinary and methodological boundaries.

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