

‘Clear as Mud’: Toward Greater Clarity in Generic Qualitative Research

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Abstract: *We have observed a growth in the number of qualitative studies that have no guiding set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the established qualitative methodologies. This lack of allegiance to an established qualitative approach presents many challenges for “generic qualitative” studies, one of which is that the literature lacks debate about how to do a generic study well. We encourage such debate and offer four basic requirements as a point of departure: noting the researchers’ position, distinguishing method and methodology, making explicit the approach to rigor, and identifying the researchers’ analytic lens.*

Keywords: *generic qualitative research, basic qualitative research, rigor, methodology*

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The impetus for this article was a casual discussion among the authors about the various challenges we faced when reviewing manuscripts and grant proposals that did not align with any specific qualitative approach. These challenges motivated us to extend the conversation about generic qualitative research approaches and encourage ongoing discussion and debate about them, particularly as they are practiced within the health sciences. Our intention is not to be prescriptive about the ways generic qualitative studies should be carried out but to put forward our concerns for consideration. The purpose of this article is to build on the work of Thorne, Sandelowski, and others (Thorne, Joachim, Paterson, & Canam, 2002; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2002; Sandelowski, 1986, 1993, 2000; Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997; Thorne, 1991, 1997a) by analyzing the current state of generic qualitative research approaches and proposing more rigorous criteria for their design and evaluation.

A variety of reasons led us to this examination and discussion. First, basic or generic approaches to qualitative research have become quite common, even though few and disparate guidelines for their implementation or evaluation have been proposed. We see no reason to believe that this trend toward generic studies will be reversed; rather, there are several indications that this is a growing trend. Second, there is the problem presented to and by masters' students wishing to explore a qualitative research question. In programs where course-work demands are heavy, students rarely have the time to develop an in-depth understanding of qualitative methodological approaches. Third, there are a growing number of clinical researchers who have good clinical questions that can only be addressed through a qualitative approach. It is rarely feasible for these researchers to engage in a deeply theoretical and methodologically sophisticated study, yet this should not exclude clinicians from thoughtful rigorous inquiry. Fourth, for those who review

proposals and manuscripts, there is the pragmatic concern that evaluating the scientific appropriateness of a qualitative study that does not align itself with any particular approach or methodology can be a particularly challenging task. Last, there are many conversations about methodological concerns, often with conflicting arguments. With the rapid expansion of qualitative literature, researchers face a daunting task keeping abreast of the debates. For many, a generic approach is seen as a less demanding option.

In the literature on qualitative research, many different terms are used to define research that does not fit within an established qualitative approach. In recent efforts to clarify generic approaches, Thorne et al. (1997) describe 'interpretive description' as a 'noncategorical' qualitative research approach (p. 169) and Sandelowski (2000) puts forth what she calls "basic or fundamental qualitative description" (p. 335). Merriam (1998) refers to this genre of research as basic or generic qualitative research, whereas Brink and Wood (2001) refer to all descriptive qualitative research as exploratory research and categorize it as a Level 1 research endeavor. Many authors merely state that they are reporting on a qualitative study, without defining what that means in the context. Merriam takes the view that generic qualitative research studies are those that epitomize the characteristics of qualitative research but rather than focusing on culture as does ethnography, or the building of theory as does grounded theory, "they simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (p. 11).

From our perspective, generic qualitative studies are those that exhibit some or all of the characteristics of qualitative endeavor but rather than focusing the study through the lens of a

known methodology they seek to do one of two things: either they combine several methodologies or approaches, or claim no particular methodological viewpoint at all. Generally, the focus of the study is on understanding an experience or an event. For this article, we define generic qualitative research as that which is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies. This article is not a plea for a purist approach to qualitative research; rather, it is a plea for more attention to, and examination, discussion, and critique of this common and somewhat pressing problem in qualitative research. There is a need and a place for generic qualitative research – the question is how to do it well.

Background

We have noted the knowledge gap surrounding evaluative criteria for generic qualitative manuscripts. For each of us, there exists the central problem of trying to reconcile various manuscripts with the purposes of knowledge development. Just as quantitative methods grew out of objectivist or positivist philosophy, most qualitative research approaches grew out of constructivist philosophy. Within this position, humans construct knowledge out of their somewhat subjective engagement with objects in their world. What is represented in many generic qualitative manuscripts, however, is a sparse understanding of the importance of an epistemological or theoretical position from which to begin research.

In all its many different forms, the central aim of research is knowledge development. The processes of knowledge development are framed by the types of knowledge that are sought and are, of necessity, rigorous, demanding, and meticulous. These processes must be scrupulously

applied throughout the entirety of a study, to ensure that the knowledge that is developed is not flawed, and therefore of little use to the discipline it purports to inform. The trend towards generic qualitative research, or research that does not claim explicit philosophical foundations, is currently evolving and highly contested. For example, Thorne et al.'s (1997) interpretive description is a noncategorical, highly interpretive approach that requires explication of theoretical influences, and an analytic framework that locates the interpretation within existing knowledge. In contrast, Sandelowski (2000) suggests that basic or fundamental qualitative description is categorical, less interpretive, less abstract, and has the goal of a straight descriptive summary of the data. While debate exists around how to conduct a generic qualitative study, this debate has yet to address the question of how to evaluate a qualitative study that is not based on a particular foundational premise.

Devers (1999) applies this criticism about lack of criteria to all qualitative research in health services. Describing the search for 'good' qualitative research, he says that the field must engage in a collective 'qualitative' process to determine what criteria to adopt. We view the problem Devers describes differently. Within the traditional or established qualitative approaches, researchers grounded within a particular methodology generally know and state emphatically their methodological affiliations. Even when they do not do so, it can sometimes be readily detected from the references they use and the theoreticians to whom they give primacy. Quality criteria within methodological boundaries are available but they are not uniformly, and only idiosyncratically, applied. A problem arises, however, when we try to develop quality criteria that are applicable to all qualitative approaches. This task has been unsuccessful because the fundamental suppositions, presuppositions, and premises that need to be considered when using a

particular approach vary significantly, making it virtually impossible to set criteria that apply to all. This difficulty signals the problem for generic approaches that we seek to address. If quality criteria for each differ, it is the mixture of approaches and methods that creates a problem in generic research. Quality criteria that apply specifically to generic qualitative approaches are the intent here.

In the field of education, generic qualitative studies are among the most common forms of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). They characteristically draw from concepts, models, and theories in educational, developmental or cognitive psychology, or from sociology, which provide the frameworks for the studies. Analysis of data uses concepts from the theoretical framework and generally results in identification of recurring patterns, categories, or factors that cut through the data and help to further delineate the theoretical frame. In the health sciences however, we see generic research studies that fail to designate a methodological or theoretical framework, and which frequently cite incommensurable methods of data collection and analysis. These deficits give rise to several questions. Can one do qualitative research that is not in some sense methodologically and, thus, philosophically oriented? Has qualitative research reached a point where we wish researchers to adopt a received view of an approach and never question their own relationship to the approach or phenomena? Are qualitative researchers no longer required to state the philosophic position that guides the research, or the position of the researcher vis-a-vis the research question? Do we want to reach these latter stages? These questions are critically important because underneath generic approaches to qualitative research lies a much deeper issue: “What needs to be there for generic research to be credible as qualitative?”

The questions that are posed within each discipline carry those disciplinary traditions and perspectives. Science within those disciplines must accommodate and honor those perspectives. The disciplinary perspective of the authors is nursing, even though we each have different specialty areas in nursing and our methodological expertise differs. Thorne et al. (1997) present an impassioned and compelling argument for “a quintessentially nursing form of science” (p. 171) in the qualitative domain. This argument is based on nursing being an applied or practical science, without the limitations that tie many other sciences to theoretical or methodological orthodoxy. Thorne (1997b) also makes the point that researchers in applied disciplines who present qualitative research findings must understand that research results may well find their way into clinical applications. However, no discipline can stand alone, particularly in this age of multidisciplinary research. In no discipline can genuine scholarship advance without examination, discussion, and critique of the old as well as the new. Such discussion and critique is what is largely absent from the literature related to the many original or melded methodological approaches in health science research. Since a great deal of discussion was previously given to defending qualitative methodologies in health science research, it is difficult to comprehend why there appears to be a dearth of critique of generic qualitative approaches.

Generic approaches: Specifying some parameters

Across disciplines there have been numerous attempts to begin a concerted discussion of generic forms of qualitative research (Kvale, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thorne et al., 1997; Sandelowski, 2000; Silverman, 2000). In particular there has been lively discussion focused on a desire for a universal set of criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative reports, regardless of the approach that has been used (Thorne, 1997b; Silverman, 2000). These discussions are

important and necessary for the ultimate development of guiding criteria. Thorne et al. (2002) make the point that “historical trends are important to understanding the style and form of research reports, and also for evaluating the quality of the findings on the basis of reported aspects of the inquiry process” (p. 3). Sandelowski and Barroso (2002) propose that we shift the debate concerning quality in qualitative research from a concern with epistemology to a focus on aesthetic and rhetorical concerns, which are part of epistemic criteria. In pursuit of this aim, they reconceptualize research reports as a “literary technology that mediates between researcher/writer and reviewer/reader” (p.1). They maintain that there is still no consensus on quality criteria for qualitative research, despite many efforts over the past 20 years to develop criteria to evaluate the quality of qualitative research. We agree with the argument of Sandelowski and Barroso that no singular set of evaluative criteria can effectively address the wide range of methodologies that fall within the rubric of qualitative research. Each qualitative approach needs to be evaluated in a manner that is congruent with its epistemological and methodological origins. Similarly, generic approaches need to be evaluated from one, or potentially many, methodologically congruent positions.

Qualitative approaches do not encompass a single universally understood position. Arising as they do from multiple and evolving philosophic understandings of the world and the nature of humanity, there are many different standpoints from which to evaluate qualitative research (Sandelowski, 2002). Sandelowski and Barroso’s (2002) argument correctly posits that qualitative research can be judged only on its individual merits based on the research report. This means that the responsibility for laying out the merits of a particular study lies with the author(s). Qualitative researchers cannot invoke a known method in a few words. Enough detail about the

study, the approach, and the methods needs to be included so that the reader can appropriately evaluate the research.

Multiple and contrasting epistemological perspectives exist, even within the qualitative research community. There are those among us who argue that postmodernity has changed the way research is viewed and, thus, that many of the old habits of custom and usage in science need to be overturned. Others argue that qualitative researchers need to honour the philosophical and methodological roots rather than overturning them. We argue from the latter position.

Accordingly, we posit that research reports aiming for credibility as generic qualitative research must address the following four key areas:

1. the theoretical positioning of the researcher;
2. the congruence between methodology and methods;
3. the strategies to establish rigor; and
4. the analytic lens through which the data are examined.

Theoretical positioning

Theoretical positioning refers to the researcher's motives, presuppositions, and personal history that leads him or her toward, and subsequently shapes, a particular inquiry. A researcher's motives for engaging with a particular study topic are never a naïve choice. The notion of researchers as value neutral observers has long been challenged and overturned. Notions of researchers being able to "bracket" personal values and prior knowledge of a substantive field are open to question and debate. To some extent, it depends on one's interpretation of bracketing. Some see it as a way of identifying and managing the researcher's assumptions and

presuppositions about the phenomenon. Others see it as implying that these need also to be held in abeyance. For example, in traditional or critical phenomenology, the former interpretation is accepted and bracketing is what you do to achieve the phenomenological reduction (Caelli, 2000). However, critical scholars have interpreted bracketing as the putting aside of one's presuppositions and have, therefore, discarded the notion as untenable and undesirable. This underscores the importance of researchers indicating both the position from which they speak about the research (Cheek, 1995; Lather, 1986; Rudge, 1996) and the approach and the methods chosen to explore the topic. This turn is reflected in the substantial literature that has accumulated around the notion of reflexivity (Koch & Harrington, 1998; Anderson, 1991; Lather, 1991; Warren & Bourque, 1991; Collins, 1990; Woolgar, 1988; Harding, 1986).

A further positioning occurs through disciplinary socialization to particular research approaches (Ray, 1999). Disciplinary socialization occurs when a researcher receives his or her research training within a disciplinary culture or setting where a particular approach is well known and accepted. Researchers within that disciplinary or local linguistic community are conversant with the approach, its conventions, and what it represents, and these become part of the taken-for-granted life world of the researcher (Bernstein, 1991). Frequently, problems arise when these researchers write for publication because the shorthand that they are accustomed to using when speaking about the approach is not understood beyond their particular research community. A second problem originates in the early socialization of qualitative researchers. Not all students are schooled in a tradition that emphasizes the philosophic and methodologic underpinnings of a particular approach. Their failure to address these foundations may be more a reflection of their educational exposure than their personal research capacity. We argue that, at a minimum,

researchers employing a generic approach must explicitly identify their disciplinary affiliation, what brought them to the question, and the assumptions they make about the topic of interest. In their report, investigators must also demonstrate congruence between the questions posed and the generic approach employed.

Methodology or method(s)?

When engaging in any qualitative research, methodology must be clearly distinguished from method. Methodology reflects the beliefs about knowledge and existence that arise from the values in the philosophic framework that is to be employed (van Manen, 1998). Methodology also represents theoretical frameworks that guide how the research should proceed (Rawnsley, 1998; King, 1995; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Harding, 1987), and implies a concern for constructing a particular type of knowledge (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Although all research is value driven, few research approaches accord such significance to clear recognition of the values and assumptions inherent in the theoretical framework as does the qualitative domain. Methods, on the other hand, refer to the tools, techniques, or procedures used to gather the evidence (Harding, 1987). For example, to honor the value placed on enabling the voices of all participants that is part of a feminist methodology, researchers seek methods that are congruent with those values.

A lack of methodological clarity is among the most common problems identified in generic qualitative studies. In the absence of an explicit methodology, the reader of these studies is left to speculate about the research approach, by piecing together clues based on data collection or analysis methods. Generally, the type of methodology employed, and the philosophical

assumptions about human nature, govern the reporting of findings in the qualitative domain. Sandelowski (1993) suggests however that an overemphasis on reporting and defending methodology may result in insufficient attention to the substantive findings of the research project because of space limitations. The preoccupation with the selection and defense of methods, to the exclusion of the substance of the research, has been referred to as methodolatry (Chamberlain, 2000; Janesick, 2000; Harding, 1989). We do not advocate in favor of idealizing methodology but, rather, that relevant methodological issues and method must be understood and clearly articulated in generic qualitative studies.

Lowenberg (1993) argues that confusion exists in interpretive research methodology between the levels of epistemology, methodology, and methods. Frequently the terms methodology and method are used synonymously (Morrow & Brown, 1994) or are used in an inconsistent manner. Much of the confusion may arise from different positions explicated in the literature. For example, Woolcott (2002) asserts that participant observation is the core of all qualitative research approaches, whereas Morse and Field (1995) define it merely as a data collection technique. Explicit in this example are the reasons why there may be a genuine lack of understanding among some researchers about the differences between method and methodology. In some instances the inconsistent use of terms may be based on disciplinary differences: “methodology is inevitably interwoven with and emerges from the nature of particular disciplines” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p.164). Disciplinary allegiances must be made explicit then for two reasons: (1) as a signal to the researcher’s theoretical positioning, and (2) as an indication of the possible disciplinary-related methodological interpretations and associated methods of the

author(s). This needs to be done in order to avoid the confusion to which Lowenberg (1993) refers, and to maintain integrity in the research report.

Although methods are primarily regarded as tools or techniques in qualitative research, not all methods are appropriate to all qualitative methodologies. The tools used to collect and analyze the data must be congruent with the epistemological and ontological inferences of the approach taken (van Manen, 1998; King, 1995). While some methods have their origins in a particular methodology, for example having participants review findings, such methods may be imported into a generic approach without invoking the methodology of origin only as long as they are congruent with the research question and the purpose of the research. Another methodologic aspect of generic studies that frequently lacks clarity relates to saturation. Claims of saturation are often made without an explanation of what saturation means in the context of the study. The notion of data saturation was introduced with grounded theory, however it has been appropriated by other qualitative approaches with limited discussion of its meaning. Saturation is rarely evident in research reports. We believe that evidence of saturation must be given in the presentation of the data and discussed via the forms in which it was recognized during the analysis. In a generic study, it is not sufficient to merely say that saturation was achieved, without explaining clearly what is meant by the term.

Rigor

We argue that qualitative approaches need to be rigorous. The notion of what constitutes a rigorous qualitative study has been the subject of hotly contested debates over the past two decades and is often intertwined with debates about what constitutes quality criteria. Authors

have grappled with the importance and interpretive implications of concepts such as reflexivity, legitimation, representation, and the politics of location (Cheek, 1996; Coffey, Holbrook, & Atkinson, 1996; Purkis, 1994; Collins, 1990; Lynch & Woolgar, 1990; Richardson, 1991). The texts that engage this discourse struggle with questions such as: “What makes a qualitative account credible?”, “How does one construct a multi-vocal account?”, “Whose account is privileged in a text?”, “What responsibility does an interpreter have to declare his or her positionality?”, “Is ‘member checking’ incommensurable with a constructivist epistemology?” Despite this lively, exciting, and deeply reflective discourse, many authors of qualitative manuscripts seem unaware of these debates, and rarely do authors of generic studies locate themselves within these debates.

Not only has there been an intriguing debate about what constitutes a rigorous qualitative study, but there has been an important evolution of thought as notions of rigor mature. This evolution can be observed both across disciplines and authors as well as within individuals’ published work; well known examples are those of Lincoln and Guba (1985), Denzin and Lincoln (2000), and Sandelowski (1986, 1993). In recent years there have been efforts to consolidate rigor discourse by providing an evolutionary perspective on the arguments (Sparkes, 2001; Putney & Green, 1999; Emden & Sandelowski, 1998a, 1998b; Koch & Harrington, 1998). While these authors use somewhat different labels for the evolutionary stages, the core ideas are similar. Qualitative rigor began with efforts to establish criteria that were equal in form and intent to those criteria held sacrosanct in quantitative research. As philosophic notions underpinning an interpretive paradigm were embraced by a new generation of qualitative researchers, the need for a new understanding of rigor became apparent. Efforts at this stage still emphasized methods as

the exclusive foundation for a credible qualitative study. However, as researchers matured in their understanding of approaches informed by various philosophic and methodological premises, an imaginative but often confusing array of approaches to rigor were subsequently proposed. More recently a postmodern influence is evident as notions of moral soundness, representation, and power differentials are foregrounded in the rigor debates. Despite this rich history, we continue to see researchers claim allegiance to a particular approach to rigor without acknowledging the historical context, incongruence, or potential datedness of their choices.

Not since early in the methodological discourse on qualitative inquiry has the emphasis been on technique or methods as the prime consideration when demonstrating a rigorous interpretation. The notion that a single set of criteria can be applied across all interpretive contexts has been widely disputed (Manning, 1997; Schwandt, 1996). Different qualitative approaches are based on fundamentally different principles, and criteria for one approach may be in direct conflict with criteria for another approach. Our position is that qualitative researchers need to 1) articulate a knowledgeable, theoretically informed choice regarding their approach to rigor, and 2) select an approach that is philosophically and methodologically congruent with their inquiry. Researchers' approaches to these two issues must reflect an understanding that rigor is a deeply theoretical issue, not a technical one (Sandelowski, 1993; Mishler, 1990).

As an example, the practice of returning to participants to review, clarify, or validate tentative findings depends entirely on one's theoretical stance. Few would argue that it is feasible for a participant to reflect on or validate the intent of a statement made in a prior interview, given that their own understanding of the topic is changing and will evolve as a consequence of

participating in research. However, returning for the purpose of seeking new insights based on the reflection of both interviewer and participant reflects a fundamentally different understanding of the practice. By comparison, in critical phenomenology one would of necessity go back to participants and ask them to critique their own accounts to see if, on reflection, they considered all the elements described in the interviews to be essential to the experience of the phenomenon (Caelli, 2001). These examples illustrate how readers will need to understand the researcher's purpose and theoretical rationale for returning to participants before they can judge the rigor of this particular step in the research.

We argue that in-depth methodological knowledge may be outside the ambit of many people wishing to conduct a generic study. Investigators need then to ensure rigor by adhering to principles that are congruent with the assumptions of the approach they are using. For example, if a participatory action approach is used, the study may be evaluated by the degree to which the collaboration was achieved, and change facilitated among participants and researchers (Mill & Ogilvie, 2003). In contrast, a study guided by critical or emancipatory ideas may be evaluated by the degree to which competing interpretations are drawn out. If presenting a feminist inquiry, the account will be evaluated by how carefully issues of power are considered, whose perspective is privileged, what is left out of the account and how this is negotiated. Accounts need to demonstrate awareness of the basic methodological assumptions employed, with an explicit account of how these are addressed in the study. The assumptions and principles that inform a generic study may not be based on the well established theoretical traditions that inform each of the established approaches, but the research choices made in any generic study are still informed by a set of assumptions, preconceptions and beliefs. It is these influences that need to

be articulated by generic researchers. With these considerations addressed, readers can feel confident that the research report presents a rigorous and thoughtful study.

The analytic lens

We use the terms ‘analytic lens’ to refer to the methodologic and interpretive presuppositions that a researcher brings to bear on his or her data. While theoretical positioning was about the researcher and his or her motives for pursuing a particular area of inquiry, the analytic lens is about how the researcher engages with his or her data. All research approaches have underlying presuppositions about the nature of knowledge (i.e. epistemology). Qualitative approaches also carry with them implicit assumptions about what it means to be human (i.e. ontology). The underlying assumptions of the approach should then implicitly guide every aspect of the study. Sometimes these presuppositions or assumptions are explicit, as they are for example in Heideggerian phenomenology. Even when not explicit, the assumptions of the established qualitative methodologies can be understood via scrutiny of the abundant rich and finely nuanced discussions about qualitative approaches that are now found in the literature.

Generic qualitative research is not supported by this abundance of referent literature. Still, it is incumbent on researchers wishing to pursue a generic qualitative approach to closely examine the assumptions they bring to bear on the study, and to explain them in any resultant manuscript. The study should be designed to be contiguous with the positions and assumptions that led to the research question. It is only through understanding of these elements that the quality of a study may be evaluated. Identification of the researcher’s position is of the utmost importance, and

generic researchers must make their own assumptions clear, as well as ensure that the methods they choose are congruent with those assumptions.

The issues of congruence or commensurability are particularly apparent when researchers borrow methods or selected components of established approaches when designing their generic qualitative study. Such borrowed components were developed as part of a deeply theoretical whole and their use conveys an allegiance to a distinct set of assumptions. When pieced into a generic study, those assumptions are often contravened or ignored - a situation that leads readers into a quandary when evaluating the reports of the research. A frequent example again relates to saturation; many claim that 'sampling was concluded once saturation was reached.' While saturation has a distinct theoretically embedded meaning in grounded theory, its ubiquitous and non-selective use risks rendering the term meaningless to the qualitative research community. We are not suggesting that novice researchers should be more sophisticated than other qualitative researchers. What we wish to highlight are the dangers inherent in making such claims in the absence of diverse methodological knowledge.

Further along the continuum of borrowing components from established approaches we find reports where the researchers claim to use a particular qualitative approach, but the methodological depth and interpretation of the data demanded by the stated approach are missing. In fact, many of these studies resemble more of a generic qualitative approach, given their thin or 'hollow' allegiance (Thorne et al., 1997) to the approaches they purport to emulate. Most often these studies present a thematic analysis almost as the status quo, although it is not clear precisely why it was done. Sometimes, the reader can see why it was undertaken, even

though the author fails to make the reasons explicit. At other times however, it is not at all clear and a thematic analysis remains only that and adds not at all to an understanding of the topic of interest. Then there is the increasing number of studies that report only the themes that were identified but fail entirely to take the research a further step to show what meaning lies beyond the themes. It is these meanings that need to be embedded in the theoretical and historical context of the research and the topic researched. We find this to be an increasingly common occurrence, and believe it stands as evidence of the need for more discussion of generic approaches. If researchers wishing to pursue a straightforward generic study had literature to turn to for guidance, there would no longer be the need to claim thin or false allegiance to an established qualitative approach.

Conclusions

We have defined generic qualitative research as that which is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies. We see no reason to believe that generic qualitative studies will fade from the qualitative scholarship horizon. On the contrary we see many reasons why this will be a growing trend, particularly in applied disciplines. Without a body of literature and critical discussion, novice qualitative researchers, their supervisors, clinical researchers, and manuscript and grant reviewers will not have the methodological foundations to move forward in their work. We argue for an epistemologically and methodologically congruent standard rather than an incoherent amalgamation of methods or techniques. We have offered four key issues for discussion: a declaration of the researcher's position, congruence between methodology and method, a clear articulation of the researcher's approach to rigor, and an explanation of his or her analytic lens.

Our goal is not for these four issues to be reified as ultimate criteria, but to help stimulate the much-needed critique around the issue of generic qualitative research. Critique is essential to the development of any subject or branch of learning and qualitative methodology is both of those. Critique has played and will play an important role in the ongoing development of qualitative approaches and has led us in directions that were previously unknown in research terms. For this reason, new developments occur all the time. However, such developments should not be received uncritically, nor should any approach or methodology be accepted merely because of a lack of scrutiny and critique from the field.

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