Reflection/Commentary on a Past Article: “Generic Qualitative Approaches: Pitfalls and Benefits of Methodological Mixology”

Renate Kahlke

How Did It Fit Into Your Career Path?

I began exploring generic qualitative approaches (also called basic or interpretive; Merriam, 2009) while designing a study for my doctoral dissertation. My research topic and questions were derived from my practice as an instructional designer in health professions education, and I struggled to fit the questions I had in mind under the umbrella of any of the major qualitative methodologies I encountered. Generic approaches offered a path forward by providing me the flexibility required to tailor-make my research design for my questions and context.

As a graduate student, this approach also challenged me to grapple with the core principles that lay behind social constructivist qualitative research design in order to ensure alignment and rigor without a “rule book” to follow. Understanding the principles, such as constructivism or inductive analysis, behind many qualitative research decisions is not quickly learned or easily assessed. However, a robust understanding of such principles is necessary in research decision-making—from study design to the language used in dissemination (Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O’Brien, & Rees, 2016). The ability to articulate research principles is also arguably a central outcome of research-focussed advanced degrees such as the PhD, regardless of discipline or research approach.

How Did It Impact Your Work?

Generic approaches have become a key tool in my qualitative research tool kit. Particularly at moments where the topic (or approach to the topic) is relatively new or poorly understood, generic approaches offer a path forward that is broadly exploratory. In these cases, taking a deep dive into a small sample (e.g., as is common in narrative inquiry) has many advantages although does not purport to offer the breadth required to open up new ground in multiple directions. In contrast, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) offers a great deal of breadth, but large sample sizes are required when the topic is nebulous or broad in scope (Morse, 2000). As a result, it can be prohibitively resource intensive when topics are in their infancy. That said, tools from these established methodologies can support generic qualitative research, while, at the same time, researchers can deviate in ways that they see as necessary to fulfill their goals. Exploring new ideas is exciting but can be daunting—generic approaches have offered me a tool through which to navigate uncharted waters with flexibility, and some permission to change tack in response to conditions.

Perhaps more importantly, the flexibility of generic approaches gave me permission to be less pedantic and more playful, less rule bound, and more responsive to questions and context. These approaches led me to enjoy creativity, elegance, and alignment in qualitative research design. This is certainly possible within more established methodologies, but I think the philosophy of bricolage—or adaptive research artistry—behind generic approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) sets the tone for a more creative approach to research design rather than an anxious page-by-page following of rules set out in a methodological rule book. Since this article was published (Kahlke, 2014), I have spent time thinking about and playing with the role of artifacts and images in interview settings (Kahlke & Eva, 2018) and engaging in conversations with other scholars interested in this kind of methodological creativity (Cristancho et al., 2015; King et al., 2013). In my experience, this philosophy of research design works best when talking and working with scholars who hold different perspectives or who come from different disciplines. These conversations are
fundamental to learning and growing as a researcher—they bring to light new tools and approaches, prevent premature closure, challenge the relevance of findings, and keep the work fresh and exciting.

How Did It Impact the Field?

I think this article was timely in a few different ways. First, it was published at a moment when qualitative methodologies had achieved significant traction in many traditionally quantitative fields, including mine. At the same time, there was (and still is) growing frustration with methodological prescriptions that felt stifling when paired with unconventional, practice-derived questions (Thorne, 2016). Researchers were looking for approaches that would allow them to be more adaptive in their research design while simultaneously seeking guidance to ensure that their work was rigorous. Second, the groundwork for generic approaches had already been laid by many of the authors I cite in the article such as Thorne (2008), Sandelowski (2010), and Merriam (2009). There had also been significant conversation about creating quality criteria (e.g., Tracy, 2010) and reporting guidelines (O’Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014) that could be used across qualitative methodologies. I hope that this article contributed meaningfully to the growing literature on generic approaches by guiding new researchers toward tools to support their “bricolage” and away from common pitfalls.

Were There Any Surprises That Came From This Publication?

I wrote this article as a way of exploring a research approach that was new to me and familiarizing myself with relevant methodological conversations. I was surprised to see the number of citations of this article climb so rapidly over the past 4 years. It has been cited in a number of methodological papers and books as well as in a wide range of journals from applied fields. It had not occurred to me that someone studying tourism might find something that I had written useful! I am delighted to have been a part of this conversation and to remain engaged with a community interested in thinking and talking through these often unconventional approaches.

What Is the One Thing That You Think Has Changed the Most in This Area Since You Published This Manuscript?

The popularity and subsequent acceptability of various generic approaches continues to grow. This popularity and the availability of references on the subject is, in some ways, a double-edged sword. On one side, papers like mine lend researchers a form of authority through which to claim that generic research approaches are “a thing” when readers and reviewers are unfamiliar with them. They also offer a starting point through which to enter discussions about when and how to use generic approaches well. On the other side, such quick references can come to operate as a “methodological shorthand” that stands in for longer and clearer discussions about what was done and why.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the structures within which we work and publish have been slower to adapt than have qualitative researchers and others who build on or implement findings from qualitative work. Elsewhere I have argued that, regardless of whether they are enforced by editors and reviewers, there are strong conventions around the length of research articles (including methods sections) that often result in the use of such methodological shorthand (Kahlke, 2017). Continued movement toward flexibility in article length (particularly in methods and results) and implementation of reporting guidelines will be invaluable in ensuring effective reporting, which in turn will be invaluable in ensuring that high-quality qualitative studies are published. The need for appropriate and transparent qualitative reporting guidelines and flexible word limits may be even more important for generic approaches given that much of the existing methodological shorthand available is often an imperfect fit for these studies. My hope is that this article (and the conversation as a whole) has offered new researchers guidance on the tools and skills required to do a good job of developing and navigating generic studies as well as permission to be a bit playful in their research design.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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ORCID iD

Renate Kahlke @ http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4473-5039

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