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Strengthening the Choice for a Generic Qualitative Research Design

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Abstract

Supporting the choice for research using a generic qualitative design is needed to assist the researchers with helpful guidance and descriptions about the approach in research. The name “generic” can be rather obtuse. Determining its appropriateness goes beyond discussions about combining elements of other traditional qualitative designs and considers the generic approach as a standalone methodology. Despite its inherent flexibility, the strength of the generic design offers a view of descriptive research data for interpretation that includes personal meaning making in research and is particularly well suited for counseling and other social sciences. The strengths, benefits, and limitations of the generic design are reviewed to assist the researchers in their selection of a generic qualitative research methodology and further the professional literature with increased knowledge and understanding. Counseling professionals benefit from the generic design because of its exploratory nature into real world experiences as perceived by those who live them.

Keywords

qualitative research, generic qualitative research, basic qualitative research, flexibility in qualitative research

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Strengthening the Choice for a Generic Qualitative Research Design

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Supporting the choice for research using a generic qualitative design is needed to assist the researchers with helpful guidance and descriptions about the approach in research. The name “generic” can be rather obtuse. Determining its appropriateness goes beyond discussions about combining elements of other traditional qualitative designs and considers the generic approach as a standalone methodology. Despite its inherent flexibility, the strength of the generic design offers a view of descriptive research data for interpretation that includes personal meaning making in research and is particularly well suited for counseling and other social sciences. The strengths, benefits, and limitations of the generic design are reviewed to assist the researchers in their selection of a generic qualitative research methodology and further the professional literature with increased knowledge and understanding. Counseling professionals benefit from the generic design because of its exploratory nature into real world experiences as perceived by those who live them.

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Introduction

With qualitative research constantly evolving and increasing in the number of submissions for dissertations, journal articles, and manuscripts (Anderson, 2017; Bellamy et al., 2016; Brown, 2019; Caelli et al., 2003; Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Kahlke, 2014, 2017; Levitt et al., 2017; Percy et al., 2015), such growth in the counseling profession (Hays et al., 2016; Prosek & Gibson, 2020) has prompted discussion about clarification of the various types of qualitative methodological approaches. The rationale for choosing a qualitative approach is not in question but increasing numbers of researchers are relying on the concept of flexibility and openness in the generic approach as justification for its use (Chenail et al., 2011; Cooper & Endacott, 2007). When research questions lead to a qualitative lens that offers flexibility in designing the study, the generic approach has become a strong choice in counseling and other social sciences (Caelli et al., 2003; Florczak, 2017; Kahlke, 2014; Levitt et al., 2017; Percy et al., 2015; Willgens et al., 2016).

As faculty mentors for dissertations in the counselor education and supervision profession, we have found generic studies to be preferential over other qualitative methods by more than half. So, what is it that makes this a preferred method? Counseling topics include many exploratory areas where little research is found. Seeking depth of experiences with individuals who live through them could very well be phenomenological research, but the generic approach offers researchers the opportunity to develop questions and ideas for topics that can be differentiated at a higher level of inquiry (Bellamy et al., 2016; Prosek & Gibson, 2020). The intention of generic methods includes representation of a broad range of ideas, beliefs, and experiences, thus making the choice practical for counselor educators as they seek

to know more about people's lives through what occurs in the real world and not bounded by internal psychological meanings (Aguas, 2021; Bellamy et al., 2016; Caelli et al., 2003; Percy et al., 2015). Quite often generic qualitative methodology is used as a last resort rather than a standalone preference like phenomenology or case study research (Kahlke, 2014). When research questions are more exploratory in nature or when there are limitations in obtaining data, a generic approach, however, can be useful (Kahlke, 2014).

In our experience, there have been inquiries as to the academic rigor in using a generic method (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018; Hays et al., 2016). Support for the strength of the generic qualitative design is discussed hereafter. Defining the generic method and comparing it to phenomenology provides some discussion about the benefits of generic qualitative methods as an intentional choice. First, generic qualitative is defined, then compared to phenomenological research. Then, the benefits and limitations support that a generic approach is not "a last resort," but a soundly considered research methodology well suited to the counseling profession.

Generic Qualitative Methodology Defined

A qualitative research method is selected to collect real world data in words without pre-set answers and then interpret the meaning individuals associate with the given social or individual concern using interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2016). The term "naturalistic" is often used to acknowledge the focus on settings of generic research where interest lies in the meaning made by the research participants of the phenomena under study (Kahlke, 2014). Among the various qualitative research designs are the traditional approaches of ethnography, case study, narrative, grounded theory, generic, and phenomenology (Chenail et al., 2011; Percy et al., 2015). However, the qualitative form of the generic approach and attention to its growing evolution in recent years is warranted.

The commonality to all types of qualitative research is using words and language as data to express information, definitions, uncovered realizations, and affirmations of subtleties in the human experience (Daher et al., 2017; Levitt et al., 2017; Percy et al., 2015). The generic qualitative approach is a design to discover and explore firsthand experiences described by individuals within a real-world context (Chenail et al., 2011; Kahlke, 2014; Levitt et al., 2019; Percy et al., 2015; Willgens et al., 2016). Multiple authors have commented on the need for more clarity on using the generic qualitative approach over the years (Aguas, 2021; Aronson, 1994; Bellamy et al., 2016; Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Merriam, 1998, 2009), such as Caelli et al.'s (2003) article with the clever title wording "clear as mud." Most recently, Kostere and Kostere (2021) supported the need for a better definition of this method in a text to include specific identifiable procedures and the presentation of the researcher's theoretical orientation in dissertations. Still, their definition lacks specificity beyond emphasis on qualitative methodology using qualitative procedures to explore people's practical experiences (Kostere & Kostere, 2021, p. 3). What makes generic qualitative methodology unique?

Building upon work published by Caelli et al. (2003), Kahlke (2014), Percy et al. (2015), and others, justification for selecting generic qualitative design has shown to be appropriate when the purpose is to understand the perceived experiences and unique perspectives about those experiences from the participants involved in the study. A generic approach does not focus on a cultural context for interpretation from which meaning is made (Hays & Singh, 2012). Even so, Percy et al. (2015) stated that generic qualitative inquiry is useful when trying to determine participants' subjective beliefs and opinions about their external experiences, or experiences that are part of their living in the world, which is what makes it distinct from other methods.

Looking broadly into topics of interest offers opportunities for research that is creative, adaptable, and even unconventional (Kahlke, 2018). Kahlke (2014) described the generic approach with descriptive and interpretive facets to assist researchers in selecting a methodology but adding more naturalistic details in the present context of exploration. A generic qualitative research design is one approach to conduct research on the nuances of complex phenomena by engaging with the population of study and providing detailed descriptions of the qualitative process and findings from their points of view (Chenail et al., 2011; Daniel, 2019).

When topics are exploratory in nature, small sample sizes with depth are what generic research provides that allows for increased descriptions of subtleties in the research design and analysis (Kahlke, 2017). However, even larger sample sizes provide for breadth of discovery, but not always depth in the research topic (Brown, 2019). Additional discussion about the meanings identified and thematized adds to the qualitative richness of the generic methodology when researchers draw conclusions from the participants' perspectives (Daher et al., 2017).

A generic qualitative approach for gathering and analyzing data provides the inquirer with a sense of flexibility (Kennedy, 2016; Percy et al., 2015). Such freedom to include characteristics of other qualitative designs while not being completely grounded in them allows for inquiry of broad experiential phenomena. Qualitative designs analyze and gain an understanding about specific areas of interest based upon how people experience the world and their place in it (Chenail et al., 2011; Daher et al., 2017). A generic qualitative approach in research attends to experiences that are more descriptive and perhaps limited in research rather than those that are of a lived experience that phenomenology explores with more depth of experiences (Percy et al., 2015).

Comparison with Phenomenology

In our experience, the most common challenge when selecting which qualitative approach is most suitable is differentiating a generic approach from phenomenology (Percy et al., 2015). Phenomenology is a methodology that explores the thing that makes participants human through their lived experiences in an area of interest (Aguas, 2021; Finlay, 2011). Whereas a generic qualitative approach explores the perceptions of participants about a phenomenon, the phenomenological method explores the "embodied experience" (Finlay, 2011, p. 16). By design, phenomenology asks a broad general question about the real world lived experiences of individuals and how those experiences affected their lives.

Though Husserl's (1962) philosophical ideas created the basis for phenomenology, its distinctive focus is on the essence of the phenomenon (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). The descriptions provide vivid content of the experience across multiple participants rather than meaning making to the individual (Giorgi, 2009). It was Van Manen (1990) who established hermeneutical phenomenology with four themes to guide researchers in their reflections on the ways in which we act, think, behave, and live in the world. Lived space is the experience of a place, lived body is the way our physical self feels, lived time is the temporal experience rather than clock time, and lived relations relates to our experiences of others (Finlay, 2011, p. 20). Altogether, the importance of mind, body, self, and others is inherent in studies that explore physical engagement in the world (Aguas, 2021).

Much of the literature emphasizes flexible foundations in using a generic qualitative approach, which stretches traditional research boundaries typically confined to other epistemological and ontological orientations, such as phenomenology (Chenail et al., 2011; Kahlke, 2014; Levitt et al., 2019). The phenomenological approach offers a way that participants can describe their lived internal experiences in a time and space where they can feel heard, satisfied, and even relieved of experiential loneliness (Moustakas, 1994). By design,

Moustakas intended to allow phenomena and the participants living through them to speak for themselves. At its beginning, Moustakas (1994) was not heavily structured in his interview process with research participants, beginning with a social conversation to establish comfort in the interview venue. Afterwards, the “co-researcher” (participant) was asked to focus on the phenomenon being explored and to describe meaning and depth of experiences that pertained to that event or experience. Such questions consisted of “What were the feelings experienced?” or “What thoughts stood out for you?” Finally, questions were asked about the effects of the phenomenon in question on the individual’s life, including questions such as “How did the experience affect you?” or “What changes did you notice?” According to Moustakas (1994), textural themes are those that describe phenomenal or material qualities of an experience, or “what” occurred, whereas structural themes represent meanings of the experience, or “how” their lives were affected. Common themes were assessed, and, in the end, textural and structural descriptions were recognized, and meanings and essences were considered (Moustakas, 1994).

More recently, Creswell (2018) maintained that phenomenology is a form of inquiry that asks two primary questions: “What have been experiences about the phenomenon in question?” and “What factors have impacted your experiences of that phenomenon?” Giorgi (2009) emphasized the need to “direct” participants as opposed to “leading” them so that the researcher’s phenomenon of interest can be addressed. After all, the researcher is concerned about details and content in terms of their relevance to the experience being researched (Giorgi, 2009). In addition, phenomenology’s focus is on the lived experiencing of the participant’s phenomenon in their internal impressions and cognitive processes about the activity (Van Manen, 1990), whereas the generic qualitative approach lends its attention to what the experiences are about, and the content of the conscious experience as perceived by the participants (Aguas, 2021; Percy et al., 2015).

While phenomenology explores the lived experience of an identified phenomenon, such as what it is to be mourning and in grief, generic qualitative methodology explores the ways the experience is described and perceived in the real-world context (Willgens et al., 2016). Such focus on individual perceptions of their experiences allows the researcher in a generic qualitative approach to stay close to the data and its analysis using participants’ actual words (Kahlke, 2014; Sandelowski, 2010). We have found that in counseling and other social sciences, the constructivist nature of such an approach promotes unique research that is not easily generalizable but provides richness in its findings as highlighted by Brown (2019). In qualitative research, there can be more elaborate descriptions, observations, and narratives that phenomenology may not capture. The generic approach allows for questions that can include specificity to broaden the data for analysis and description (Kahlke, 2014, 2017; Percy et al., 2015). The generic qualitative approach, therefore, affords the researcher flexibility, as it infuses the narratives with broad descriptions and does not adhere to the bounded philosophies of the more traditional research designs.

Benefits of Generic Qualitative

It has been suggested that the generic qualitative research design is most appropriately applied when other research designs are ill-equipped to align with the research topic being investigated (Percy et al., 2015). We contend that the wide variety of research topics in counselor education and supervision particularly benefit from using rigorous qualitative procedures but designing that research with generic methodology in mind. However, many researchers contend that this tendency to view studies broadly is by design, thereby intentionally refusing to align with any single design (Kahlke, 2014). As a result, “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” (Kahlke, 2014, p. 39). Subsequently, this inherent flexibility results in preventing a generic qualitative design from fading from the research methods horizon, as reminded by Caelli et al. (2003).

Determining the appropriateness of the generic qualitative research methodology goes beyond what some have described as combining elements of other qualitative methods. Some researchers maintain that because the generic qualitative approach is not clearly defined by traditional boundaries, it possesses elements of other qualitative designs (Kennedy, 2016). Also, because it maintains a sense of flexibility that other designs do not, it is not viewed as having the foundation on which to build a credible study (Caelli et al., 2003). However, considering that the generic qualitative approach consists of few characteristics that differentiate it from others, it is time to realize that conducting a generic qualitative research study includes a similar merit, a certain trustworthiness, transferability, and credibility like other established qualitative designs such as phenomenology or a narrative design, and can stand as a fully acceptable and respected methodology in today’s world of research, a contention that has been challenged in the past (Kahlke, 2014).

Rigor (trustworthiness) is just one area where qualitative researchers often find themselves defending their choice in methodology (Anderson, 2017). Kahlke (2018) proposed strong conventions around our methodology so that flexibility and adaptability are perceived as effective and valuable reporting to ensure high quality that distinguishes rigor. Despite the general acceptance that all qualitative research assumes multiple realities, a generic design is still bound to theory, quality data collection, and data analysis (Anderson, 2017; Caelli et al., 2003). What motivated the researcher to study the topic involves a need for congruence to align the assumptions of methodology and theory and obtain a credible and trustworthy analysis (Bellamy et al., 2016; Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Whereas phenomenology is used to gather information about the lived experiences of participants, by design it typically asks questions so that the interviewee’s agenda can be recognized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A narrative design, for example, claims to acquire a rich understanding of experiences through a thorough review of the participants’ stories providing the necessary data via narrative interviews and even oral histories (Levitt et al., 2017). The generic qualitative design is expressive as interviewees are asked specific questions on the topic of interest while attending to an external rendition of personal experiences and actual activities described in contextual settings (Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Kennedy, 2016).

Some researchers contend that the literature about the generic qualitative approach that exists in higher education journals lacks complexity (Kennedy, 2016). In counseling, a recent article failed to even identify generic methodology at all (Prosek & Gibson, 2020). Many such professionals in the field of research go further to claim that generic qualitative approaches lack thoroughness in their philosophical assumptions (Percy et al., 2015). Those assumptions present ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological questions that must be answered in any research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Levitt et al., 2019). An ontological stance explores the nature of reality for the notion being examined. Epistemology poses the question “what is the relationship between the researcher and the concept being studied?” An axiological question asks of values and/or biases on the part of the researcher. Finally, a methodological assumption is that the qualitative researcher maintains inductive reasoning skills and implements an acceptable research design to guide the study. Whereas the generic qualitative design is now clearly recognized as a format that can enlighten researchers about the perceptions of an individual’s reality, the relationship between the researcher and that which is being researched, the roles and values present in the study, and the method used during the research process (Levitt et al., 2017, 2019). Due to the increasing popularity of the generic qualitative design, many dissertation writers and researchers alike continue to share significant and informative results yielded by this research choice.

Limitations of Generic Qualitative

Counseling qualitative researchers tend to ask questions about topics of meaning, experiences, and perspectives, with questions that are important across methodologies, traditions, and experiences (Rose & Johnson, 2020). When these issues are addressed through qualitative research methodologies, they are subjective. Humans make meaning of their experiences in life, which allows for interpretation to make sense of the data (Anderson, 2017; Rose & Johnson, 2020). There often becomes a perceived need to justify qualitative analysis through a sense of objectivity and responsibility, which in a generic design means the researcher is influenced by reading, discussions, and subjective beliefs (Brown, 2019; Rose & Johnson, 2020). Trustworthiness continually comes to the forefront of discussions around any type of qualitative research, but certainly around the generic approach that promotes exploration and flexibility (Bellamy et al., 2016; Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Kahlke (2014) presented an extensive review of some challenges noted in literature. At times presented as a positive option, what has been termed “method slurring” (Chenail et al., 2011; Kahlke, 2014) is one issue commonly noted with generic qualitative research where the design may include combining components from multiple methods (Bellamy et al., 2016). Of significant concern, comments that challenge the credibility of generic research have been refuted over time with extensive description of the appropriateness for its selection according to the research question and approach to answer it most pragmatically (Bellamy et al., 2016; Cooper & Endacott, 2007; Kahlke, 2017). Credibility needs to be addressed in every research study and for generic qualitative research, Caelli et al. (2003) presented key areas for consideration: theoretical position, correspondence of methods to the methodology, lens used for data analysis, and research strategies to provide trustworthiness and rigor. Numerous authors have explored the issue and found that due to the uniqueness of each research question and various strategies, indicators of rigor and trustworthiness will continue to be reviewed and assessed (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Daniel, 2019; Florczak, 2017; Percy et al., 2015).

Conclusion

To facilitate the interview, multiple questions or prompts can be used to allow participants to elaborate on previously identified experiences (Kahlke, 2014; Kennedy, 2016; Levitt et al., 2017). This approach in the generic method allows for impressions or perceptions deemed significant to the interviewee to be identified and described. Consequently, holistic experiences from the aspects of all senses are potentially explored in the phenomenological approach when thick descriptions are captured to get at the essence of what is occurring in the phenomenon from those who lived it (Finlay, 2011). On the other hand, the generic qualitative format provides an opportunity for the researcher to ask exploratory questions about a phenomenon, thereby gathering data about how people perceived their experience of the phenomenon (Brake & Kelly, 2019).

The generic qualitative approach does not always adhere to the characteristics of a single established methodological tradition; however, it provides researchers with an ability to explore a phenomenon or experience according to descriptions of attitudes, beliefs, and opinions as well as the facts thereof (Bellamy et al., 2016). Some researchers suggest that the characteristics of the generic qualitative and phenomenological approaches are very similar and even overlap considerably so that the differences are indistinguishable (Chenail et al., 2011). It is apparent that from questions about the strength and benefits of choosing a generic approach, a solid rationale must be presented to ensure the selection of the methodology fits the research topic and purpose (Hays et al., 2016). Not only must the methodology fit in this way, but there must be specific points highlighted to show how such a choice furthers

professional literature in a way that increases knowledge and understanding. Generic qualitative has little research specifically noting its strengths (Kahlke, 2017), so even this article acknowledges limitations, though with more academic discussion of what some consider to be limitations may be additive to researchers' perceptions of the methodology. In fact, Brake and Kelly (2019) noted that a generic approach is especially appropriate when there is little foundational literature on the topic. Ongoing discussions about the methodology aligned with the phenomena will strengthen selections for qualitative research in general.

Particularly noting the absence of significant contributions to the professional literature specifically on generic methodology, more articles that clarify and present purpose and foundations of the research present information that allows for significant consideration when designing a research study. Qualitative research adds to subjective truth about phenomena but together creates a rich context through which an in-depth understanding is developed (Caelli et al., 2003; Florczak, 2017). Truth is exposed through various questions and methods to find meaning from multiple sources. Generic qualitative research allows for enough flexibility to explore multiple realities that exist but vary depending on environment and culture (Bellamy et al., 2016; Florczak, 2017). Some of the flexibility comes in the analysis of data (Brake & Kelly, 2019). More than just asking for participants to tell their story, as in phenomenology (Florczak, 2017), generic methodology provides for more specific questions in addition to the research question, so the data provides descriptions of meaningful details about the outward experience.

Emphasis on providing detailed descriptions of the qualitative process and findings (Daniel, 2019) is reiterated to note the advantage of utilizing generic methodology, particularly by including the philosophical underpinning (Caelli et al., 2003; Daniel, 2019; Levitt et al., 2019). All qualitative research gains rigor by identifying bias and expressed philosophical assumptions expected with other qualitative approaches (Caelli et al., 2003). In generic qualitative research, it is essential to identify any assumptions or bias to demonstrate the researcher's point of view using a strategy like reflectivity that allows the researcher to understand their position in the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To that point, Brown (2019) encouraged a reflexive approach in the work between researcher and participants to reduce the role differential innate to the experience. Additionally, caution is encouraged by Chenail et al. (2011) as reported findings are offered within the context of the research.

Kennedy (2016) proposed a specific model to help novice researchers discern the appropriateness of generic qualitative research for their studies. The generic qualitative research design serves as a guide for many studies and is consistently incorporated into a variety of research studies by researchers and students alike (Kahlke, 2014; Kennedy, 2016; Levitt et al., 2019). Therefore, some researchers promote generic qualitative research as a standalone and valuable framework for studies about human experiences. There is limited information available, however, so it becomes clear that authors often write about what generic qualitative research is not. It is often vague, applicable in various settings, and does not adhere to the philosophic assumptions of other traditional qualitative designs (Levitt et al., 2017). Even though Eliot and Timulak (2021) provided steps for research using the generic qualitative method, they emphasized the meaning of data that arises from the narratives of real-world participants close to the research. Still, the choice to follow a generic qualitative methodological approach embeds a philosophical footing that is intentional, or surely needs to be (Josilowski, 2019; Kennedy, 2016). Identified as "generic," this qualitative approach promotes research as nonspecific, basic, or common. However, is it time to give this approach a more appropriate name? We welcome your input.

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