# *The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence*

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ABSTRACT  Many elements of qualitative research are shared between the variety of approaches, and often the overlap of epistemology, ethics and procedures encourages a generic and flexible view of this type of inquiry. This article argues that there is an essential tension between flexibility on the one hand, and consistency and coherence on the other. Such tension may encourage qualitative researchers to consider the intentions and philosophical underpinnings of the different approaches in greater depth in order to arrive at an epistemological position that can coherently underpin its empirical claims. This article is intended to encourage a more thoughtful engagement with different qualitative approaches by highlighting distinctive elements of three of the most common approaches. We suggest that the researcher be context-sensitive and flexible as well as considerate of the inner consistency and coherence that is needed when engaged in qualitative research.

KEYWORDS: *coherence, consistency, ethnography, flexibility, grounded theory, methodology, method-slurring, phenomenology, qualitative research*

## *Introduction*

There is considerable overlap in terms of procedures and techniques in different approaches to qualitative research. These approaches often share a broad philosophy such as person-centeredness and a certain open-ended starting point. Researchers using these approaches generally adopt a critical stance towards positivist perspectives and search for meaning in the accounts and/or actions of participants. This is due to 'disenchantment' with earlier, more traditional approaches and their failure to capture the experiences and perspectives of the people whose lives, thoughts and feelings are being explored. There is also a shared concern for attention to the various kinds of context within which the research takes place – for example, a sensitivity towards the social and political as well as a heightened awareness of ethical issues involved in such study.

Such overlap of epistemological, aesthetic, ethical and procedural concerns can encourage a fairly generic view of qualitative research – a 'family' approach in which the similarities are considered more important than the differences, and where the notion of *flexibility* becomes an important value and quest. This is demonstrated both in older and in recent texts (see for instance Bryman, 2001; Crabtree and Miller, 1999; Potter, 1996).

However, there is another point of view, concerned with how such flexibility can lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence. In this view, such 'method slurring' (Baker et al., 1992) and inter-changeability can dilute the value of consistently pursuing the integrity of a particular approach from beginning to end – from its philosophical underpinnings to the specificity of the subtle nuances that it may adopt in its methodological procedures.

The present article attempts to show that it is possible to transcend these tensions and include these concerns in a third position that can allow flexibility as well as consistency and coherence. This third position is a more differentiated one in which an understanding of purposes and relative appropriateness of procedures leads to greater specificity about what can be mixed and what can not. We are arguing for *this* concept of *appropriateness* rather than *method for method's sake* on the one hand, or the *flight from method* on the other.

This article is intended to encourage a more thoughtful engagement with different qualitative approaches by highlighting distinctive elements of three of the most common approaches. It is hoped that this may help researchers make choices in relation to their research questions and methodological options. We are aware that the differences between approaches become exaggerated, but this might achieve greater clarity in the argument.

## Exploration of the tension between flexibility and coherence

Researchers who focus on the generic approach raise the notion of 'flexibility' to prime consideration, and many suggest 'doing what works'. This approach does have some philosophical precedent in the old Greek idea that the 'object determines the method by which it is approached' (Kisiel, 1985: 6). Indeed, Gadamer (1975) in his book *Truth and Method* was a strong proponent of the view that no abstract method could pre-determine an approach to study. Such philosophical consistency, however, has not historically informed the development of a generic approach to any remarkable degree; rather the generic trend has arisen out of very pragmatic concerns. Much of this is due to the early history of qualitative research when specific approaches had not been established nor developed in any depth.

The term 'approach' is used in this article to differentiate it from the narrower term 'methods used'. It indicates a coherent epistemological viewpoint about the nature of enquiry, the kind of knowledge that is discovered or produced and the kinds of methodological strategies that are consistent with this (Giorgi, 1970).

We wish to acknowledge the need for flexibility in at least two ways:

1    To respect as much as possible the primacy of the topic or phenomenon to be studied and the range of possible research questions by finding a methodological approach and strategy that can serve such inquiry. This means not being too attached to method for method's sake – a kind of reductionism. Janesick (2000) calls it 'methodolatry', an obsession with method as opposed to contents and substance.

2    To acknowledge that a number of qualitative research strategies and skills are generic, such as interviewing, thematizing meanings, and the kind of writing that finds a balance between narrative and illustration.

However, although there is some overlap, there are distinctions and differences in the nature of qualitative approaches; in history, strategies, epistemology and ontology. Bailey (1997) gives an interesting analogy: although familiar drugs in a generic group are often interchangeable and used in the treatment of similar conditions (she mentions Aspirin, Bufferin and Tylenol – American brands – as examples of analgesics), they have nevertheless unique chemical compositions and therapeutic indicators. They might be compared to various styles of qualitative inquiry. The analogy is not complete however, and not wholly appropriate; although there are generic elements between approaches, they are rooted in a number of distinct disciplines and worldviews, which can be illustrated in our examples.

Although we do not wish to support 'methodolatry', we take the position that distinctive approaches do lead to greater clarity about the nature of the phenomenon to be explored, the questions posed and the ways researchers answer questions and communicate their findings. The style of each approach is also distinct; for instance, some approaches are more formal than others. Each form of inquiry even has its own vocabulary as Creswell (1998) demonstrates. A framework for the differences can be established.

Such a framework could acknowledge that specific approaches, such as phenomenology or grounded theory, have distinctive features on a number of levels. They are concerned with the nature of question they are suited to answer, the kind of data collection consistent with this, and also the kinds of analysis and presentation of results that fit with this approach; such 'goodness of fit' or logical staged linking can be referred to as 'consistency'.

If such consistency occurs then the whole thing 'hangs together' as coherent; that is, the kind of knowledge generated in the results or presentation section does what it said it would do under the aims of the project. In order to consider these criteria of consistency and coherence in greater detail we will need to look at the distinctive differences between three qualitative approaches. We offer a diagram (Figure 1, below) that emphasizes differences of approaches in terms of the following criteria: the aims of the research approach, its roots in different disciplines and ideologies, the knowledge claims linked to it and, to a lesser extent, the data collection and analysis specific to each approach.

| DIMENSIONS | PHENOMENOLOGY | GROUNDED THEORY | ETHNOGRAPHY |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Goal** | Describe, interpret and understand the meanings of experiences at both a general and unique level. | Develop a theory of how individuals and groups make meaning together and interact with each other; of how particular concepts and activities fit together and can explain what happens. | Describe, interpret and understand the characteristics of a particular social setting with all its cultural diversity and multiplicity of voices. |
| **Research question** | What is the structure of this particular experience? What is it like to be or experience a particular situation? | What theory can be formulated from real world events and experiences to explain this social phenomenon? | How are people positioned in a particular social context and how do they interact with each other, especially with significant others? What are the power relationships within the setting? |
| **Data gathering** | Focused on the depth of a particular experience; interviews, narratives – anything that is able to describe the qualities of experiences that were lived through. | Open-ended beyond a general direction – breadth and depth at different phases; a variety of methods in which the questions may change at different stages depending on the data that are emerging and clues from the literature. Progressive focusing and theoretical sampling. | Through intensive fieldwork – participant observation and interviews – of key informants who are experts on the social setting and have rich knowledge of it. Also through visual data. |
| **Analysis** | Thematic analysis which clarifies the meanings by moving back and forth between whole meanings and part meanings. | Use the analysis to inspire a creative and plausible theory; constant comparison and organising the data into useful conceptual patterns by codes, categories. Construct and build credible models. | Coding and building patterns. Searching for the main building blocks of local culture and its themes. |
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| **Presentation of results** | Different levels depending on audience and purpose: a description of the essence (structure) of the experience, its 'bare bones'; followed by how each theme occurs in different and unique ways; sometimes, a more poetic and narrative account which communicates what the experience is like (its textures). Combinations of these. | A descriptive outline of the elements of the model and how they interact and fit together to form an explanatory theory that accounts for the range of the data collected. Often a diagram that represents these elements and relationships; followed by an exploration of the themes and concepts in relationship to both specific data examples as well as relevant literature. | An ethnography – the story of people in their social and cultural context describing behaviour, activities and social relations, and the way they perceive their position in the setting under study and society. |
| **Knowledge claim** | Transferable general qualities (essences) of what makes the experience what it is; description of unique contexts. Empathic understanding. | A plausible theory that can be applied and tested in other contexts. An explanatory model. | Knowledge about people within a setting or situation and the way in which they relate to others and perceive themselves. |
| **Historical background** | Philosophy, psychology. | Sociology and social psychology. | Social and cultural anthropology |

F IGURE 1

## Distinctions between approaches

Here we give an overview of the main elements of three approaches.

### 1 PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology has as its focus the faithful description of how experiential phenomena such as 'becoming a mother', or 'learning how to play chess' happen. Through paying careful attention to how such phenomena occur in unique and concrete contexts, it hopes to reveal in linguistic terms the essential features of a phenomenon – what we can say that captures it in its most general sense and also what we can say about how it may vary from situation to situation. These variations help us to formulate 'essences' that may be judged by communities of readers as giving relevant and transferable insights into what an experience may be like through clarification of its essential structures and textures. It thus fosters intersubjective understanding into the human condition. Following from this, the kind of coherence and consistency that is important within this approach can be expressed as follows:

- It formulates a research question that asks respondents to narrate actual experiences that they have lived through. It is primarily from these concrete descriptions of 'lived experiences' rather than from the respondents' views, beliefs or conclusions that the researcher draws in order to pursue the analysis. The methods of 'data collection' thus need to be consistent with an intention to gather descriptions of respondents' experiences that are internally meaningful without reference to external theories or preconceived directions beyond the request to describe the experience as fully as possible. Interviewing for this purpose, requires an interviewing style that is different from a semi-structured interview. Data collection thus focuses on the specific 'time when . . .' or 'the situation in which . . .' and the internal coherence of 'what appears' is honoured as closely as possible at this stage.
- The methods of data analysis need to be consistent with a phenomenological or hermeneutic understanding that 'part meanings' within a text or experiential narrative can only be understood in terms of the role they play within the 'whole' sense of the text. To be coherent within this approach, the analysis needs a strategy that is mindful of a 'back and forth' movement between particular meanings and the sense of the text or experience as a whole. A 'part meaning' is thus not given more value just because it occurs more times. This is why the term 'content analysis' is avoided and the term 'constituent' is often used in order to indicate a concern with how the 'part meanings' function together and interactively make up the whole. The danger of computer aided analysis packages is that they can divert attention in a way that over-emphasizes a concern with the 'parts' and obscures the intuition of the 'whole'. The philosophical depth of this distinction lies in Husserl's notion that meanings need to

be holistically intuited and can not merely be put together in a kind of additive or quantifiable way.

- It presents its results in such a way as to be consistent with a concern to communicate both the 'structures' and 'textures' of the experience. The term 'structure' refers to the 'essences' or 'bare bones' of what makes the phenomenon what it is. In other words, it wishes to articulate the most invariant themes that emerge transferably from one situation or person to another. For example, are there any essential things that can be said about anger that apply to both this individual and that individual and this situation and that situation? This is a scientific emphasis in phenomenology. The term 'texture' refers to the communication of evocative qualities that capture how unique experiences and descriptions can convey the rich and participative nature of 'what the experience is like'. Such presentations require a more elaborate form of writing in which unique experiences are indicated in a way that presents their evocative nature. This is an aesthetic or literary emphasis in phenomenology. How the choice is made to emphasize or combine the presentation of 'structure' and 'texture' depends on the purpose of the research and one's readership. (For a more elaborate discussion of this see Todres, 2000.)

- This approach is consistent with a 'knowledge claim' about the primacy of experience – that no matter how much experiences are structurally prefigured by political, cultural and languaged contexts, it is how these contexts are 'gathered' and 'lived out' by people that is an important starting point for qualitative enquiry. The coherence of this 'knowledge claim' is one that is very cautious. It merely says: these seem to be the essential features of this experience as lived through these individuals in these contexts. One can speculate as to why, and offer plausible interpretations in one's discussion but the approach cannot speak of 'causes' or 'explanations' as if such objective 'how-things-are' analyses were possible. The 'knowledge claim' is one that reports 'appearances' in this time and place and offers possible insights that others can relate to in a way that deepens readers' understanding, and that can be of use for application. The usefulness of the insights can only be finally validated by interpersonal 'use' and the judgement of that 'use'.

The kind of flexibility that is possible between phenomenology and other approaches may include the following:

- The use of coherent narratives, presentations of experience that can be linguistically expressed, biographical accounts and texts of experiences, as long as all these accounts have a significant dimension of 'specific occurrences' with all the textures of time, place, sequence and experienced meaning.

- Other approaches can use phenomenological analysis (such as those used by Giorgi, 1985; Kvale, 1996; or van Manen, 1990) for analysing the meanings of texts or accounts.

In arguing that a phenomenological approach needs coherence and consistency between its goal, research question, data gathering methods, modes of analyses, presentation of results and modes of 'knowledge claim', we are not primarily interested in preserving the credentials or boundaries of this approach as an ideological commitment for its own sake. Rather, the issue about coherence and consistency refers more simply to a thoughtfulness concerning the empirical claims made by researchers and whether they fit with the approach and methods taken.

### 2 GROUNDED THEORY

The focus of grounded theory research is on developing plausible and useful theories that are closely informed by actual events and interactions of people and their communications with each other. For the researcher this means centring on social and psychological processes such as 'becoming a member of a group', 'learning to live with pain', or 'interaction between patients and professionals'. This entails noting changes in conditions and context. However, the emphasis on these processes also gives grounded theory coherence and consistency:

● Tracing the social/psychological processes that are at the core of people's behaviour and thought is essential. For the researcher it is a journey of discovery where each stage depends on the other. If there is no coherence and consistency within the approach, the processes cannot be followed and theory generation is impossible.

● It is important to formulate a research question or focus on a problem that takes into account the complexity and the process of human action and interaction. This means that the researcher follows the tenets of symbolic interactionism – in particular that human beings are not passive recipients of cues or influences of the social environment to which they merely respond; they must be seen instead as dynamic agents who take an active part in the process, based on the way in which they interpret the situation. In interaction with others they create meaning. This interpretation of social reality and the meaning they attach to action and experience give consistency to the research. The research aim must be consistent with the original overall intentions of grounded theory.

● The methods of data collection and analysis are consistent with the aim of the research, which is theory development, a notion that should be traceable throughout the research. This means progressive focusing on particular concepts and ideas important for the emerging theory. The collection and analysis of data is therefore interactive. This is a specific feature of grounded theory. It is more developmental than other approaches, and therefore the development is reflected in the interaction between data collection and analysis. Theoretical sampling based on previously occurring concepts ensures coherence and consistency. Initially the focus centres on the phenomenon; then the theoretical ideas are further developed so that the theory can 'emerge'.

● The categories emerging from the analysis can all be linked to each other, and to the developing theory.

Flexibility is possible in a number of ways:

● Aspects of grounded theory are often used in other approaches (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995); theoretical sampling in particular is seen as a useful tool for many researchers who are able to give direction to their various forms of qualitative research. The description of a culture or of social change may contain elements of a core category and theory development.

● The presentation of findings may also be similar when the focus is on meaning and interpretation of experience. However the similarities to grounded theory that can be found in a number of approaches do not necessarily mean that grounded theory research has been carried out; it has to have other important elements of grounded theory such as theoretical sampling, the ongoing interaction of data collection and analysis (which gives direction to further data collection), and the generation and construction of theory. However, certain methods of data analysis used by grounded theory such as coding and categorizing can be consistently used by other approaches at certain phases of analysis.

● The theoretical ideas, which the researcher elicits from the data, are always provisional and may be subject to change depending on further incoming data. For this the approach must be flexible and the researcher open-minded. The emphasis on 'being-on-the-way' is useful for other qualitative approaches as well.

## 3 ETHNOGRAPHY

The origins of ethnography lie in cultural anthropology but it is now applied to a range of different fields. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the Chicago School of Sociology became active and acquired a reputation, much of the fieldwork carried out by its members was called ethnography. Ethnography in its early days had as its focus a culture and initially focused on its holistic portrayal, the perspective of its members – the informants of the research – on the values and knowledge they share. Through its portrayal in 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), readers obtained an understanding of the workings of the culture and its cultural members, including its rituals, rules and beliefs. However, in more recent times it has been used in a number of different disciplines and, according to Atkinson et al. (2001: 1) 'escapes ready summary definitions'. It has changed from a 'monolithic understanding' of culture, to people's perspectives on society and their positions within it; while formerly it focused on the shared elements of culture, it now demonstrates and presents cultural diversity and conflict. For instance, ethnographic fieldwork may focus on a hospital setting, the way in which nurses or doctors in the organization are located within it, their situation in the

structure, and indeed their relationships with each other which are linked to the cultural context of the organization.

Coherence and consistency can be discerned in the following aspects of ethnography:

- The aim of ethnography is to reveal structures and interactions in a society, the contested nature of culture, the meaning that people give to their action and interaction. It also reveals how people are situated within a cultural context. Through this, it demonstrates internal coherence. These elements or building blocks of ethnography are consistent with its foundations but also with recent changes.
- A coherent story is organized around research participants' positions in society and the varied meanings they give to their location, relationships with others and their behaviour.
- One of the main commitments of ethnography is the first hand experience of a social situation or setting on the basis of participant observation and intensive fieldwork.
- Ethnography also relies strongly on naturally occurring language of the participants in the field.

Flexibility is possible through certain procedures which ethnography has in common with other approaches:

- The researchers approach the data collection without strong prior assumptions and do not impose their own views on the words and actions of the research participants. This is difficult, of course, whether researchers are strangers to the setting they observe or, indeed, over familiar with it.
- Like grounded theory, ethnography is capable of producing testable theories that might be applied to other settings. As in other approaches, there is a reliance on language and text.
- Data analysis demands certain procedures but the choice and development of taxonomies and typologies depend on the individual researcher who adds the etic (outsider) view to the perspectives of the participants. Researchers are generally aware that, although shared perspectives exist, there is no unified perception and participants have many voices. This stance is shared with other qualitative approaches, in which there is a movement to represent the multiplicity of voices and perceptions of the participants as well as the researcher's own views and interpretations.

## *An emerging complexity*

Qualitative research is more complex than the three approaches on which we have concentrated (for example, nuances of difference between descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology or between Glaserian and Straussian versions of grounded theory). We hope that we have offered some useful general

distinctions that may encourage qualitative researchers to consider the intentions and philosophical underpinning of different approaches in greater depth. This may free researchers to become even more diverse in pursuing interesting distinctions and directions that could still be coherent and consistent.

Even in the specific approaches discussed, there is not always consensus about the exact methods, strategies and procedures to adopt. The Glaserian and Straussian versions of grounded theory have developed not only separately over time but also tend to have different purpose, procedures and outcome, or so their defenders believe (Glaser, 1992; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Critical ethnography is not only based on assumptions that have their roots in past anthropological ideas, but it also adopts a Marxist stance on power and control (Thomas, 1993). This growing complexity of the nuances of qualitative research thus appears to ask for more thoughtfulness about the dimensions used in our diagram, and generates the following questions when engaged in qualitative research practice:

● Is the phenomenon or research question the primary consideration in choosing the approach?
● Do the data collection, sampling and analysis procedures 'fit' the chosen approach?
● Does the study produce the kind of knowledge where the findings and presentation match the goals of the study?
● Has the researcher made explicit that the phases are consistent with the overall parameters of the research design?

## Concluding thoughts

Precise definitions of specific qualitative approaches are still not settled and boundaries often blurred. We do not wish to advocate exclusivity or an elitist approach, nor do we see pragmatism as a 'methodological crime'. However, it is argued here that unreflexive and undisciplined eclecticism might be avoided, not necessarily by settling on one approach as an exclusive commitment but by applying and making explicit an epistemological position that can coherently underpin its empirical claims.

Unless we say that our insights, as outcomes of qualitative research, are arbitrary, we cannot ignore the issues that are raised by philosophers of science to account for the credibility of whatever claims we make about the truth-value of our qualitative research endeavours. Whilst we may not like the terms 'validity' or 'reliability' we believe that we are accountable to be explicit about the epistemological status of our outcomes, and what we are claiming for these outcomes. Seale (1999), for example, states that the terms 'validity' and 'reliability' are no longer adequate for the issues that are linked to the 'quality' of qualitative research, while Morse et al. (2002) strongly dispute this. Following the dimensions that we have offered in this article, we

believe that it is possible to be more specific in the write-up of research that begins its methodological section with a claim about the particular status of the chosen research as well as claims about its manner of coherence, consistency and flexibility. This may include references to some of the alternative terms to 'validity' that have been generated such as credibility or trustworthiness and authenticity (a large list is given by Byrne-Armstrong et al., 2001; Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Such a section may also include an explicit consideration of whether any methodological procedures or personal disciplines were brought to bear in achieving its claims. It may also include a reflexive account of the intended audiences for which the presentation was written, the kind of knowledge-production that was intended, and some of the historical and cultural contexts within which the presentation was written. Such transparency may empower readers to evaluate the range of relevance of the research as well as its possible transferability at different levels or to other situations.

These tentative suggestions are offered as a contribution to emerging challenges of shifting the emphasis away from 'method for method's sake' to a consideration of a more reflective, thoughtful research practitioner who may represent much diversity in approach and practice, but who earns our consideration as a faithful mediator between communities in their quest for understanding.

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