**Full title:** Using naturalistic inquiry to inform qualitative description

## ABSTRACT

*Background* Choosing how to answer a research question requires an understanding of philosophical and theoretical assumptions and how these inform a study's methodology and methods. For the novice researcher, this can be an overwhelming undertaking. Ensuring there is a clear alignment between philosophy, theory, methodology and methods is an essential part of the research process, and enables research to be undertaken with clarity and integrity. This alignment must be a good fit for the research aim, and for the researcher.

*Aim* This paper describes the alignment between qualitative description and naturalistic inquiry and how it was applied to an exploration of the meaning of safety for consumers with experience of admission to an acute mental health unit.

*Discussion* Understanding the alignment between qualitative descriptive methodology and naturalistic inquiry provided a clear pathway for a novice researcher.

*Conclusion* The assumptions that underpin a methodological approach need to be unpacked in order to understand how a complex research question can be effectively answered.

*Implications for practice* Qualitative description, informed by naturalistic inquiry offers novice researchers a practical way to explore and answer complex research problems.

**Introduction**

The search for new knowledge presents novice researchers with a plethora of ontological, epistemological and methodological choices. The research aim drives these choices, but multiple approaches are frequently available. Indeed, as nursing science develops, more opportunities for flexibility in research design are presented (Yous et al., 2020). Making use of the synergies between compatible research approaches enables novice researchers to explore the unique context of their study. This paper describes how a qualitative descriptive approach, informed by the tenets of naturalistic inquiry, was used to explore a complex research problem.

**The research problem**

The exemplar that provides the context for this paper is a Doctoral study that explored the meaning of safety for people who had been an inpatient of an acute mental health unit. Safety is given a high priority in mental health organisations (National Mental Health Commission, 2019; Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Healthcare, 2018), and acute mental health units are places in which consumers expect to feel safe (Stenhouse, 2013). Studies have shown, however, that many consumers do not experience acute mental health units as safe places (Akther et al., 2019; State of Victoria, 2019; Stenhouse, 2013). The conundrum of why consumers might not feel safe in acute mental health units, despite the organisational investment in safety, made this a complex problem. The problem inspired the Doctoral candidate to reflect on how the concept of 'safety' was understood by mental health consumers. Therefore the study aimed to *'explore how the meaning of safety is described by people who have experienced admission to an acute mental health inpatient unit.'*

**Philosophical assumptions and methodology**

The approach taken to answer a research question is informed by a researcher's philosophical assumptions (Clark, 1998). Assumptions about what constitutes truth, that which is real, represent a study's ontological foundation (Coleman, 2019). From this foundation, assumptions about how truth can become known represent the epistemological basis for the way a study is designed (Ryan, 2018). A researcher's ontological and epistemological perspectives are expressed through a study's methodology, that is, how data will be gathered and analysed (Coleman, 2019). The ontological and epistemological foundation for any methodology is likely to sit somewhere along a spectrum of paradigms, or world-views (Kelly et al., 2018). A paradigm such as positivism, which assumes that truth is objective and quantifiable, aligns with quantitative research methods (Kelly et al., 2018). Other paradigms, such as interpretivism and constructivism, assume that truth is subjective and myriad, and that each individuals' unique life experience is the basis upon which truth (reality or meaning) is formed (Lincoln et al., 2011). Interpretivist and constructivist paradigms are closely related. In interpretivism, a researcher's role is to interpret the subjective meaning of others' experiences (Guba, 1990). In constructivism, the researcher will explore the meaning that others ascribe to specific aspects of their experience (Creswell, 2014). Constructivism assumes a researcher brings their own history of experiences to the interpretive task, and that truth (meaning) is therefore intersubjective (Creswell, 2014). These paradigms align with qualitative research methods, which are designed to explore subjective experiences and uncover meaning (Huttunen and Kakkori, 2020). In nursing, qualitative research approaches are eminently suited to exploring the complexity of human experience, as a means to understand how health care and outcomes can be enhanced (Nairn, 2019).

In this study, the candidate's ontological position was that consumers were likely to have had diverse experiences of acute mental health unit admission, and therefore the nature of truth (the meanings generated) would be varied, rather than singular (Huttunen and Kakkori, 2020). The candidate's epistemological position was that understanding consumers' meaning of safety required an exploration of consumers' subjective perceptions and experiences derived from their admission(s) (Court, 2013). This study was underpinned by the constructivist paradigm, as the candidate accepted that, while consumers' descriptions of what safety meant would vary, there were likely to be patterns of meaning that could be observed. The candidate also accepted that her background as a nurse, with personal experience working in acute mental health units, meant she brought her own perceptions and experiences to the interpretation of consumers' descriptions of meaning.

**Qualitative description**

After determining the compatibility of constructivism with the focus of the study, the candidate sought a suitable qualitative design. A qualitative descriptive approach was selected, as it is suited to eliciting insights about phenomena that are not well understood (Kim et al., 2017). Qualitative description is used widely in health and nursing research to generate new knowledge by enabling participants' own descriptions (data) to be reported comprehensively, without substantial transformation (Polit and Beck, 2018). As a result, qualitative description enables researchers, including novices, to stay close to the data and report findings in the form of a straightforward and logical summary (Sandelowski, 2010). The findings of qualitative descriptive studies are reported in everyday language, making them accessible to researchers, health administrators and consumers alike (Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005). Due to its communicability, qualitative description has been described as particularly useful when researching vulnerable groups, such as people with

mental illness (Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005). Although all processes of inquiry require a level of interpretation, compared to other qualitative approaches, a qualitative descriptive approach applies a low degree of inference (Sandelowski, 2010). This lower level of inference meant the candidate remained close to the participants' rich descriptions of what safety meant for them, rather than striving for deep abstraction (Lambert and Lambert, 2012).

**Naturalistic inquiry**

Naturalistic inquiry is a systematic process of inquiry that enables social or organisational phenomena to be explored as close to their natural state as possible (Sandelowski, 2000). Aligned with constructivism, naturalistic inquiry is a paradigm in which certain assumptions, or tenets, are embedded (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). Naturalistic inquiry requires researchers to take into account the context in which meaning has been generated, since meaning and context are assumed to be inseparable (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). Naturalistic inquiry assumes that while inquiry may increase understanding, it does not support predictability, since an inquirer can only draw reasonable inferences from their observations (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). The aim of naturalistic inquiry therefore, is to generate a rich and thick description of participants' commentary, supported by exemplars, and the inquirer's interpretation, to capture the meaning that seems to have been conveyed (Geertz, 2003; Armstrong, 2010). Naturalistic inquiry accepts that interactions between participant and inquirer are mutually influential, and that inquiry is incontravertibly bound in the inquirer's values (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). These values resonate when there is coherence between such things as the choice of research focus, how the research question is framed, and whether the philosophical and paradigmatic assumptions are congruent with the approach taken (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). As a novice researcher, the

synergies between qualitative description and naturalistic inquiry enabled the candidate to explore the meaning of safety for participants with clarity and integrity.

**Qualitative description informed by naturalistic inquiry**

Qualitative description and naturalistic inquiry gave this novice researcher a practical approach to follow, whilst offering flexibility as knowledge, skill and confidence developed (Kim et al., 2017). The framing of the research question ensured the focus of study was on participants' descriptions. Interviews were semi-structured and opened with a grand tour question that invited participants to share their perceptions and experiences of safety. Analysis of the data was clearly embedded in the descriptions given by participants, and findings were reported using participants' own words in verbatim quotes. A more detailed overview of how naturalistic inquiry and qualitative descriptive approaches were applied in the study is presented in Table 1.

*Insert table here*

**Conclusion**

It is important for researchers to undertake research that resonates with their beliefs, values and purpose. Understanding the alignment between different research approaches enables researchers to adapt their approach to the unique problem being addressed. Qualitative description, informed by naturalistic inquiry offers novice researchers an accessible and practical means to explore important research problems.

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Table 1: Application of qualitative description and naturalistic inquiry

| Qualitative description (Sandelowski, 2010; Sandelowski, 2000; Sandelowski, 1993) | Naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Guba and Lincoln, 1986) | Application to Study |
|---|---|---|
| Research is conducted with limited degree of manipulation | Realities understood in natural context | Participants were interviewed in a venue of their choosing such as their home or a neutral public space |
| Uses the researcher's expert (tacit) knowledge and experiences to focus on areas that are poorly understood | Researcher as 'human tool' to gather data | Individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews were audio-taped, and observations recorded after each interview. Audio-tapes were transcribed verbatim. |
| | Tacit knowledge | The candidate had more than 25 years of experience in the mental health nursing field. This afforded an awareness of the organisational context within which participants' comments were framed. |
| Seeks to understand complex human experiences | Qualitative methods | The focus of the study was on the subjective and diverse meaning of safety for participants. This meant that qualitative methods were appropriate. |
| Seek information rich cases | Purposeful sampling | The candidate sought people who had experience of admission to an acute mental health unit. |
| Illuminates patterns in the data using analytic approaches common to other qualitative traditions | Inductive analysis | Thematic analysis was used to enable multiple realities to be explored in the data. The candidate immersed herself in all sources of data, such as verbatim transcriptions, audio-files and memos to identify patterns, themes and other important elements of the data. |
| Researcher stays close to the descriptions given by participants. | Theories allowed to emerge from data | Due to the primarily descriptive nature of the study, close attention was paid to the transcripts to ensure they accurately represented the audio-recordings of participants' narrative. |
| Meaning is intersubjective | Negotiated meanings | Probes and prompts were used during the interviews to encourage elaboration and ensure the candidate was clear on the participants' intended meanings. The candidate interpretation of these meanings is reflected in the findings. |
| Describes the experience from the perspective of the people at the centre of the experience | Multiple realities described | Verbatim quotes from participants provides evidence of the multiple realities that have been explored in this study. |
| Allows a rich description to emerge through the voices of participants | Interpretation as unique sources | Continuous review of transcripts and consensus-seeking within the research team ensured that interpretation of participants' meaning was consistent with the data. |
| Findings relate only to the group studied at the time they were studied | Tentative application | The reporting of the study's findings makes it clear that the meanings are held as tentative and context-dependent. No assertions are made that suggest the findings are objective or generalisable. |
| Researcher reflexivity and transparency of presuppositions held by the researcher | Focus determined by participants rather than pre-determined by researcher | The candidate maintained a reflexive journal and debriefed with supervisors to ensure she remained conscious of how her past experience and beliefs about the world may influence her engagement with participants and interpretation of the data. |
| Provides a precise account of process, experience and events | Trustworthiness established | The criteria for rigour (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) are addressed in detailed reports and publications arising from the study (Authors own). |