‘The invisible paradigm war’: civil unrest within qualitative inquiry and the problems of sample saturation

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Aims

- Open debate about the impact of mixing qualitative methods
- Question the taken-for-granted assumption that mixing qualitative approaches is unproblematic
- Review the utility of a universal quality criteria of qualitative inquiry
- Use a specific example of sample saturation
Two ways of mixing qualitative research:

1. Conducting two separate qualitative projects and later synthesising the evidence

2. Collecting two different types of qualitative data within one project and combining them
“To design multi-method studies and to collect and analyze data without due critical attention to the convergent but distinct methodologies and traditions that we invoke is to risk creating a qualitative quagmire” (356).
Controversy over universality of qualitative quality criteria

Sensible solution to guiding overarching principles of quality (see Tracy, 2010) and simultaneously recognise the distinct aspects of individual approaches and differing epistemologies
Saturation

- **Terms**: data saturation, thematic saturation, theoretical saturation, saturation, sample saturation - generally used indiscriminately

- **Origin** - grounded theory - distinct meaning for this method

- Has become the gold standard for sampling in qualitative work
The problem

- Is it an ideal that cannot be reached? Few researchers are transparent about saturation

- Inappropriate to measure the quality of a piece of work by quality standards that have not been designed for that approach

- Sample adequacy not sample size (see Bowen, 2008)
Saturation and mixing methods

- If saturation is inappropriate for one qualitative method and not for the other - there are implications for applying it generically to both

- Can you mix two qualitative approaches that have different quality criteria?