Presenter: Dr Pauline Guerin, School of Nursing and Midwifery

- **Describe what attracted you to this paper**

  I’m particularly interested in the focus of the paper: methodolatry: the privileging of methodological concerns over other considerations in qualitative health research- which I see as an ongoing issue in much health and social science research. I think Abraham Maslow’s quote “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail” fits well in this context.

- **Explain how you came across this article**


- **Describe the study/paper including (where relevant):**

  - Research questions/focus of the paper

    The focus of the paper is: methodolatry: the privileging of methodological concerns over other considerations in qualitative health research (‘method fetishism’)

    Janesick 1994: a combination of method and idolatry, to describe a preoccupation with electing and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told. Methodolatry is the slavish attachment and devotion to method that so often overtakes the discourse in the education and human services fields. (p. 215)

    - How the paper argues for its relevance/importance (eg. gap in literature in this area, need for new methods to reach hard to reach groups)

    The paper explores the problems of ‘methodolatry’ in qualitative research, but mostly in the field of health psychology. The author argues that this is indeed a problem that needs to be considered particularly by new researchers and for researchers and mentors of new researchers or the problem will be perpetuated.

    - Summarise the primary argument/results

      The author argues that

      - There is an overemphasis on locating the ‘correct’ or ‘proper’ methods: the canonical approach to methodology
      - That there is too much focus on description at the expense of interpretation in research
      - Issues of research quality need to be considered: Quality: Reliability, validity, generalisable, credible, transferable, dependable, confirmable
      - Theory: too often, the primary objective of research is simply to collect and analyse data, but the bigger theories or the phenomenon under investigation are not often critiqued or considered: the ‘pathology of flow-charting’, Theory-first- hypothesis testing or theory-after
      - That researchers too often avoid being critical (taking a critical perspective)
      - That researchers do not adequately incorporate ontology & epistemology in the research process
Overall, the author argues 2 major concerns: research is too anchored in a positivist legacy and our focus in planning and conducting research is in the wrong place.

Give your critical appraisal of the paper
Overall, I agree with the main point of the paper but there are a number of limitations/ issues.

First- the difference between methods and methodology- the author seems to be using these interchangeably, but are they interchangeable?

Query: does one ALWAYS need a ‘methodology’ to do good research?

Difference between ‘methodology’ and ‘methods’

**Methodology:** theoretical position, rationale, philosophical assumptions or principles underlying an approach to research, not limited to the methods employed: e.g., Feminist, Grounded theory, Phenomenology, Interpretive phenomenology, Discourse analysis

**Methods:** what is done- systematic collection & documentation of information, interviews, oral histories, surveys, questionnaires, descriptive, observational,

Re: ‘qualitative’ research- is research qualitative, or are data qualitative? Is this distinction relevant? I think that philosophically, it’s not, but in reality, yes, this distinction is still made. What is ‘qualitative research’ p. 288- re: ‘even the term qualitative becoming quite meaningless’… it needs to be more about *exactly what did you do* rather than saying, eg. I did ethnography, when all you did was a few focus groups—that’s not ethnography, but the use of these terms/methods in research has, like Chamberlain states, become ‘muddled’.

Re: need to have more focus on interpretation- I query this- who does the interpreting? Is this the role of the researcher? Does that depend on who the researcher is? I would argue that at times this is not appropriate- eg. Interpreting economic data or survey data about ‘racism’ and making assumptions or judgements about those who’s information contribute to the data.

The author argues that this is the way to do research “Deciding on the epistemology (e.g. constructionist) prior to selecting the theoretical perspective (e.g. phenomenology or feminism) prior to choosing the methodology (e.g. grounded theory) and then the specific methods (e.g. focus groups) puts methodology and methods firmly in their place. Further, adopting a strategic approach to qualitative research planning of this sort should ensure that O&E considerations become explicit and promote a more theoretical approach to research.”

I have a problem with this- where is the subject matter? The people involved in the research and who are impacted by it? Where do they fit in? Is research a purely academic/intellectual endeavor?

Problem—preferred ‘methods’ driving the research, rather than letting the research issue or problem dictate how to do the research.

Conclude with how the paper might inform your (and others?) work

I’m very aware of not committing ‘methodolatry’ in my research and I am also aware of how academic and research systems and processes might contribute to the committing of methodolatry. I think this could be useful for other academics and those who supervise students and for students conducting research to consider how and when they might be privileging methodological issues over other issues in their research. Of importance is that not all research needs to be done the same way, or in a certain way, that the diversity of research needs to be acknowledged and valued for its merits, which does not always include an excessive focus on methods/methodology.

“I suggest that practised researchers have a dual responsibility to improve this situation, in their roles as publishers of material, as authors of journal articles and book chapters; and in their roles as mentors, reviewing manuscripts and supervising students.”

“recognizing the limitations of being overly specialist alongside the impossibilities of being a true generalist. Whatever the balance, I am certain that it should not be dependent upon methods. Knowing about methods certainly has value, but we should never lose sight of the fact that methods are tools rather than ends in themselves.”