Generalising From Qualitative Research

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The Controversy

- Quantitative school's asserted superiority
  - The ability to generalise their findings

- Prejudicial view that the qualitative school
  - Cannot generalise its findings
  - Therefore produces lesser form of knowledge

- Classic qualitative researcher responses
  - We need to be willing to generalise
  - No recipes for success but general cautionary tales
  - Reluctance to generalise
  - Qualitative community’s uncertainty & reticence

- A way forward
  - Drawing on multidisciplinary methodology literature
  - E.g. Education, health sciences, sociology, information systems, management, marketing, accounting
Ideographic or nomothetic focus?

- Ideographic studies of uniqueness
- Nomothetic studies for general application
- Qualitative researchers tend to ideographic
- Quantitative researchers tend to nomothetic

Qualitative cases
- Interest in themselves - particularistic behaviour, change practice within that context
- Micro-organisational focus on context, uniqueness, difference

Qualitative researchers’ generalisation avoidance:
- Little acknowledgement of generalisation
- Not a priority, avoid giving any hint of it
- Focus on rich description & nuances that are presumed not replicable

Avoidance risks
- Findings’ limited applicability & usefulness
- Unclear alternative offering
Quantitative Generalisation Problems

- Sample adequacy
- Low response rates
- Assumptions not matching socio-economic context
- Inappropriate statistical methods
- Predictions exceeding limits of assumptions & probabilities
- Non-generalisability to other time periods, locations, cultural settings
- Three different outcomes:
  - Statistical significance, result generalisability, result importance.
- Statistical analysis = ‘amulet’ projecting pseudo-scientific reliability & believability
- May not actually be generalisable to the field of practice
The Qualitative Generalisation Challenge

• Qual researchers make generalisations, even unconsciously - without explaining or justifying

• Intuitive generalisation & particularisation in changing balance for laypersons

• So qual researchers reflect everyday life
  o Drawing on past experiences to build expectations about the future

• Dangers of limited case based expectations
  o Mismatch to other case profiles & contexts
  o Overgeneralisation
  o Caution with intuitive generalisation
  o Avoid mimicking quantitative generalisation
Different Ways of Rethinking Generalisation

• Intrinsic ideographic cases begin some forms of initial generalisation
  o E.g. observations about other cases, other locations, other times
• Generalisation is central to social life and discourse
• Qualitative researchers are not exempt from this phenomenon
• Inappropriate to mimic quantitative concepts and forms of generalisation
• Generalisation is socially constructed and must account for environmental complexities across time & space
• Other means of drawing inferences and extrapolating beyond research site actors and context
• And who makes the generalisations?
  o Only the researchers?
  o What about the readers?
Apologetic Qualitative Accounting Researchers

- Sidestepping any direct generalising references
- Those that do address this, largely offer an apologia
- Implicitly assuming the only generalisation definition is statistical
- Declaring statistical generalisation limitation
  - Unconditionally or qualified by reference to some broader implications
- Examples
  - ‘need to replicate the findings in other firms/industries’
  - Expand sample ‘to generalize to other empirical settings’
  - ‘to offer more detailed examinations in other organisations’
  - ‘require comparative case studies across multiple organisations’
  - this generalisation limitation is ‘obvious but important’
  - ‘subject to the conventional limitations attendant with field work’
- Other qualifications
  - Application only within the case studied
  - Need to extend across processes, organisational levels, national cultures etc.
- Impression of methodological uncertainty & reticence
Reinterpreting Qualitative Generalisation

- A VARIETY OF FORMS OF QUALITATIVE GENERALISATION SUCH AS:
  - Cross case generalisation
    - Commonalities across cases
  - Naturalistic generalisation
    - Concepts transferring to and recurring in different settings
  - Moderatum generalisation
    - Moderate scope generalisations open to change - styled as everyday actors’ generalisations
  - Engaging actors’ implicit theories and researchers’ theories
  - Relate to realities & worldviews of wider audiences
Analytical Generalisation

- In contrast to statistical generalisation from sample to larger population
- AG generalises to social forms, relations & processes
- Through capturing both actors’ & readers’ experiences of these
- Generalise about and to other social processes in similar or different settings
- Judgment and logical argument re one study speaking to social processes in other circumstances
- Leads to construction of theoretical frameworks:
  - Beyond the bounds of the original study
  - Of more general import
Theoretical Generalisation

- Theorise about forms/meanings of social phenomena
  - Rather than focusing on frequencies of occurrence & probabilities
- Develop from local data observations to ideas at more general level
- More abstract theoretical ideas & understandings about phenomena studied
- Producing concepts, theory & rich insights
- Thick description
  - Portraying contexts, attitudes, motivations, meanings underpinning observed actions & behaviours
- Theory emerges from analysis and interpretation
- Highly contextualised accounts of processes engaging organisational actors and their lifeworlds
Analogical Generalisation

• Generalising from one or more cases to analogous cases
• One or more characteristics in one case may be adaptable to/actionable in other analogous cases
• Must be plausible & acceptable to research site actors and study audiences
• Plausibility enhanced by more similarities than differences across cases
Communicative Generalisation

• Effective communication with target audience to derive study meanings for them in their circumstances

• Adequate contextualisation so reader can assess study evidence similarity with their own setting

• Researcher must communicate findings, context, similarities & differences to audience

• Audience catered for includes:
  - General, professional, business, government, non-profit and research communities

• Stimulate community conversations about the study & its potential wider application
Naturalistic Generalisation

• Observed tendency of people to make generalisations from personal or vicarious experiences
• Developed incrementally through multiple events & encounters
• Generalisation a function of their experiences and how they tacitly accumulate knowledge and expectations from those
  o Far removed from formal predictions of the quantitative school
• Similar to qualitative research that:
  o Accumulates case-based findings
  o Develops experiential & propositional knowledge
  o Incorporates thick description & arguments into lifeworld & memory
• Empowers the readers and democratises generalisation
  o Provide sufficient context for reader to judge applicability to their world
  o Facilitates transfer of study findings to practice settings
Naturalistic Generalisation and Practice Transferability

- Associated risks:
  - Transferability is somewhat beyond researcher control
  - It lies in hands of readers
  - Researcher judgement needed re type and depth of contextual information to provide
  - Communication style & content of researcher’s publication is crucial to reader uptake

- Naturalistic generalisation focuses on practice transferability
  - i.e. it must be actionable in practice settings
  - Requires more practice language than purely research language
  - Practitioners disinterested in population averages
  - They prefer findings re contextual settings and specific circumstances that embody variation, extremes, and speak to their own situation
Quality of Generalisation

- Quality of research conducted influences generalisability

- Three particular influences
  - Sample selection
  - Credibility
  - Thick description
Sample Selection

- Sampling rationale differs from quantitative sampling
- Rather than addressing the question “How many?”
- We address:
  - Which cases?
  - Why selected?
  - What do they represent?
- Sampling aims to focus on significant dimensions & characteristics of a phenomenon
- Closer to sociological sampling for actors’ socio-cultural characteristics, interactions & meanings.
- Small sample for deep contextualised articulation of phenomenon
- Focus on selecting samples likely to yield varied characteristics of the research subject, in high concentration
- Variation embraced for explaining types of variation rather than focussing on simplistic averages
Purposive & Theoretical Sampling

- Aim to identify sources & actors best providing richest account of phenomenon under investigation

- Purposive sampling:
  - Select sample most likely providing in-depth information addressing key research questions

- Theoretical sampling
  - Select sample of cases, events, actors corresponding to or contributing to the chosen informing theory
  - Select sample most likely to directly contribute to inductively developing theory from collected field data
  - Sample selection criteria may broaden as theory develops
Credibility

• Credibility as term & concept redefined away from quantitative concept of ‘validity’
• Qualitative focus is on ‘credibility’ or ‘trustworthiness’ of data and findings
• The test of these..............................
• Do the data analysis & findings:
  o Instil confidence that this is an authentic & genuine account?
  o Deliver a plausible & convincing conclusion about the phenomenon?
• ‘Authenticity’ differentiates the qualitative from quantitative researcher
  o They have been personally engaged in the field with the actors!
• Various emergent terms also used relating to credibility:
  o E.g. Integrity, dependability, confirmability, explicitness, sensitivity
• Credibility emerges over time, admitting multiple voices
  o Authenticity & plausibility implicitly negotiated between actors, researchers & readers
Thick Description

- **Thin** description = detailed description
- **Thick** description requires the researcher to:
  - Develop empathetic understanding of actors & their context
- Researcher must probe, analyse & convey:
  - Actions, motives, symbols, meanings & situational contexts
- Access actors’ lived experiences:
  - Portray how and why they do as observed
- **Thick** description not limited to the world of the particular
  - Prompts thinking about and proposing qualitative generalisations
  - Articulates findings potentially in other contexts
  - Allows readers to assess transferability of findings to other settings
Unique – Typical - Exceptional

• **Structural corroboration**
  - Convergence of sources to reach same conclusion
  - Rather than repeated observations

• **Single case as a mirror**
  - Reflecting the world around it - potentially generalisable issues & behaviours
  - Can be a typical or exceptional case

• **Typicality as a site selection guide can:**
  - Yield insights transferrable to many similar cases
  - May require multiple cases to overcome idiosyncrasies within individual cases
  - Lead to selecting cases in similar contexts

• **Exceptional cases can lead to generalisable insights:**
  - Place same/similar actors in extraordinary settings
  - Examine extraordinary actors in common settings
  - Examine major change situations where actors may be leading change
  - Examining the unusual/unique exposes researcher to widest range of variation
  - Findings holding in extreme/diverse cases, can generalise convincingly
  - Outliers may challenge and change conventional wisdom
Why Have We Been Reticent to Generalise?

• **Three cultural conditioners**
  - Misplaced assumption that most qualitative studies are ideographic & particularistic
  - Continuing (un)conscious deference to quantitative community’s claims to superiority of their methods, findings and generalisability
  - Lack of familiarity with unique qualitative concepts and forms of generalisation
Policy & Practice Engagement

- Qualitative generalisation reflects ‘natural’ intuitive laypersons’ approach to generalisation
- Reflects case by case development of expectations
- Addresses change at the particular, situational, holistic, contextual levels
- These are the ways of policy and practice
  - Rather than mathematised research approaches & terminology
‘Generalisation’

• Do we persist with this term? .................Yes!
• Retained almost unanimously across disciplines by the qualitative research community
• Best suited and most widely employed term for communicating with practitioners & policymakers
• Abandoning the term leaves the quantitative community with freehold control over it
• So the qualitative community must redefine it in terms appropriate to communicating with and impacting on institutions, regulators, business, government, third sector & wider community