

The Art of Generalisation

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The 'deification' of generalisation?

- Unless you can say something more than “this is what happens in these 40 cases” it is a waste of public money’
- My version – ‘wider resonance’.
Theoretical generalisation. Not helpful to try to emulate quantitative modes of generalisation – especially where it is trying to do different things, answer different questions

Theoretical generalisation (à la Mason 2002)

My attempt to describe what qualitative researchers do, or might do

(weakest first):

- No reason to suspect atypicality (not very theoretical)
- Lessons for other settings
- Extreme or pivotal cases (theoretically defined)
- Analytical rigour (eg analytic induction)
- Strategic comparisons derived from understanding processes or phenomena in particular contexts that are strategically compared

Are we (am I) missing a trick?

- Maybe there is more than we can do. Push the boundaries of qualitative ways of generalising too.
 - Unless you can say something more than “this is what happens in these 40 cases” it is a waste of public money’. Assumptions:
 - Data = cases (or individuals in this example)
 - Counting is obvious thing to do
 - Bigger/more is better
 - Generalising is about scaling up/making inferences numerically
- These may be problematic in qualitative work
- REALLY understanding what is happening in 40 cases is not such a bad ambition either

**Example of qualitative data and concepts
– Living Resemblances study, Real Life
Methods Node**

- Qualitative data can be - words, pictures, interactions, settings/places, researcher observations, etc
- Real Life Methods and Realities – interest in experience, including sensory and physical



Photograph by Ed Swinden



Photograph by Ed Swinden

Claire's father (the red haired terror) and her nephew Jack

Claire: Jack he's two, he doesn't look like my father but just his whole energy and mannerisms are very, they just remind me so much of my father and he's only two and he can't speak properly yet. My father is very mercurial and he'll get an idea and he can act on it and you can tell he's thinking about things and you can almost see the cogs going and Jack's very like that...

Katherine: I wonder what your father was like then when he was a baby.

Claire: Erm, well I think he was a bit of a terror because he says you know the aunts used to refer to him as that red haired terror

Heredity

I am the family face,
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.

The years-heired feature that can
In curve and voice and eye
Despise the human span
Of durance – that is I;
The eternal thing in man,
That heeds no call to die.

Thomas Hardy

Janet and the strange case of the Spencer resemblance

Janet: In fact **it's really strange** because I went on holiday to Ireland a few years ago and erm, I was er, I was with a group of people and this lady came up, and its no word of a lie, this lady came up to me and she said 'I don't mean to be rude' she said 'but you don't know somebody called Jim Spencer do you?' and I went 'yeah, it's me Dad'. She said 'I thought it was' she said 'ooh, you aren't half the image of your Dad'. And I thought, and yet, I mean to look at me, I don't think I am, you know, I mean I'm not like you know white hair, big tummy, and I'm thinking 'What? Do I look like me Dad? (laughter). But yeah she said **she'd just seen that, the link**, that 'she must be a Spencer that one' you know

Katherine: Gosh so that was a physical thing then that she spotted?

Janet: (Overlapping) Yeah. But a lot of people say that 'you must be a Spencer because we're all quite, I mean.... we're all fair, we're all fair skinned, er we've all got big saucer blue eyes

'Involvement in the world' (Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 2002, Routledge)

'A relational-ecological-developmental synthesis where we should see the human being not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as a body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships'

To generalise

To reduce to a general form. Represent or endow with the common characters of a group without the special characters of any one member' (Chambers Dictionary)

Generalisation – assumptions and practices that aren't helpful for us

- Generalisation as reduction, abstraction, separation from the particular, 'stepping back' (definition)
- Units of analysis that are 'hard', whole, discrete, equivalent
- Commonality, frequency, as what really matters
- Association and significance (between 'hard'/whole/discrete units) as (only/mostly) statistical or technical
- Reductionist or channelled lines of expert enquiry
- Metaphors that are careless or mischievous

Rose and Dawkins on metaphors and genetics

Dawkins

'it is raining DNA. It is raining instructions out there' its raining tree-growing, fluff spreading algorithms. That is not a metaphor, it is the plain truth. It couldn't be any plainer if it were raining floppy discs'.

And Rose:

'It is hard to know which had more impact on the future directions of biology – the determination of the role of DNA in protein synthesis, or the organising power of the metaphor within which it was framed'

The art of generalisation – what might it involve?

- Recognition that we are saying something about the nature of things when we generalise
- Generalisation about real life needs particularity – particularity tells us general things
- Insight, imagination and creativity
- Evocative, real, vital understandings
- Resonance
- Inspired and imaginative lines of reasoning and search for explanation
- Communication and persuasion

The art of generalisation – what might it involve?

Relational activity/engagement - 'generalising connections'

The art of generalisation – how might it be done?

- Multi-dimensional referents and ingredients. The mixed upness of things - 'involvement in the world'
- Strategic, but also *inspired, imaginative and creative* comparisons, derived from understanding processes or phenomena in particular contexts
- Inspired and imaginative arguments in relation to research questions. 'Questions have relevancies' (Hammersley). Data aren't just 'there' as generic 'findings'
- Conscious use of different 'registers' to invoke (conjure up) different kinds of 'generalising connection'

Realities 
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