Generalising from Qualitative Research: A new old approach

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Acknowledgements
Generalising from Qualitative Research: What’s the problem?

Is this old chestnut worth worrying about?


Why are we here?
An air of respectability

The debate hasn’t really progressed in the last 10 years and we continue to rely on arguments of ‘self-justification’


So we are left with

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 110): “The only generalization is: there is no generalization”
A definition of generalisability

According to Vogt (2005, p. 131), generalizability is “The extent to which you can come to conclusions about one thing (often, a population) based on information about another (often, a sample).”
Stepping back in time: nothing new under the sun

Aristotle (384-322 BCE)
Bacon (1561-1626)
Newton (1642–1727)
Linnaeus (1707-1788)
Darwin (1809-1882)
Einstein (1879-1955)
Carnap (1891-1970)

“There is Nothing so Practical as a Good Theory” Kurt Lewin (1890-1947).
Truth as the foundation for normative generalisation

Truth theories cut across the methodological paradigms and help explain why and on what basis normative statements or generalisations can be made (Bridges, 2017; Ellis et al., 2014; Lehrer, 1990; Margolis, 2004): Truth as Correspondence; Truth as coherence; Truth as what works; Truth as consensus and Truth as warranted beliefs (Bridges, 2017, p. 185-212).

Normative in this sense means ‘right’ subject to the temporal, cosmological, epistemological, ontological and axiological context.

For example Einstein’s gravitational waves. As Dan Falk (2018) (no relation!) concludes, “Einstein hadn’t disproved that gravitational waves couldn’t exist, only that they couldn’t exist in the mathematical system that he’d used” [italics ours].
Merging of qual/quant research

Generalisation Cycles
Normative Truth Statements
Evidence
Theory

Fig. 1 The cycle of generalization from qualitative research
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Builds on</th>
<th>Citations</th>
<th>Methodology employed</th>
<th>Context of generalisations</th>
<th>Type of generalisation</th>
<th>Normative truth statement examples</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(Falk &amp; Harrison, 1998, 2000; Falk &amp; Kilpatrick, 2006)</td>
<td>3 Case studies</td>
<td>Community interactions and social capital</td>
<td>Theory of learning and social capital</td>
<td>Networks, trust and reciprocity underpin community-based learning</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>(Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, 2001)</td>
<td>10 Case studies, 700 interviews</td>
<td>Delivery of vocational education and training in regional communities</td>
<td>Synthesis of findings, leading to principles of practice</td>
<td>Social capital underpins the effective delivery of vocational education and training in regional communities</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>(Northern Territory Council of Social Service, 2004)</td>
<td>Mixed methods, reliant on 70 interviews</td>
<td>Employment disadvantaged groups</td>
<td>Theory as ‘practice principles’ for strategic interventions</td>
<td>Integrated and inclusive service and policy coordination underpin better employment outcomes</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>(Falk et al., 2006)</td>
<td>Formative action evaluation, 42 interviews, purposeful and representative sampling</td>
<td>Domestic violence policies and programs</td>
<td>Application of theory to policy development, drawing on empirical data</td>
<td>Interconnection of knowledge and identity affects network functionality and policy effectiveness</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>(Young &amp; Guenther, 2008; Young et al., 2007)</td>
<td>Mixed methods, informed by four case studies</td>
<td>Vocational learning in remote communities</td>
<td>Theory for models of service delivery</td>
<td>Access to effective training is constrained by regulated training systems which fail to consider local aspirations for learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>(Guenther et al., 2008)</td>
<td>6 intervention cases, 84 respondents, mixed methods</td>
<td>Employment and training for welfare dependent groups</td>
<td>Theory development as implications for policy and its implementation</td>
<td>Foundation employability skills which build confidence, motivation and identity support welfare to work transitions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>(Arnott et al., 2009)</td>
<td>10 evaluative case studies, 85 interviews</td>
<td>Domestic violence strategies</td>
<td>Synthesis from qualitative data for development of criteria for sustainable development</td>
<td>Effective domestic violence interventions are underpinned by local commitment.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>(Balatti et al., 2009)</td>
<td>3 Action research case studies</td>
<td>Partnerships in literacy and numeracy programs</td>
<td>Theory for principles, application to policy effectiveness</td>
<td>Stronger partnerships lead to increased social capital and improves policy outcomes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1, 2, 8</td>
<td>(Falk &amp; Surata, 2011)</td>
<td>Macro-analytic theory building supplemented by 3 case studies</td>
<td>Social interactions for learning</td>
<td>Theory for policy and strategy</td>
<td>Social interactions are the mechanism of human behaviour change, whose effectiveness is dependent on the configuration of interactions for the particular purpose in different contexts</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1, 2, 8, 9</td>
<td>(Falk et al, 2011)</td>
<td>Multi-site, multi-issue, multi-methodologies</td>
<td>Strategies and policies for managing biosecurity nationally in Indonesia</td>
<td>Analysis and synthesis of findings, leading to principles of strategy and policy development</td>
<td>Clearly defined purposeful participatory linking interactions produce strategies and policies that are effective in tailoring ‘science’ for local conditions, using local knowledge as the effective modifier.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>5, 6</td>
<td>(Guenther et al., 2014; Guenther &amp; McRae-Williams, 2014, 2016; McRae-Williams, 2014; McRae-Williams &amp; Guenther, 2016)</td>
<td>Two major Grounded Theory qualitative projects on education and training, &gt;100 interviews and focus groups, multiple case studies</td>
<td>Remote education and training for Indigenous learners</td>
<td>Theory building, principles for practice and policy, falsification</td>
<td>Coercive policies and strategies fail to improve education and training outcomes. Successful education is redefined in terms of community aspirations and alignment to philosophical standpoints.</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>1, 2, 8, 9, 10</td>
<td>(Falk, 2016)</td>
<td>Multi-site, multi-issue, multi-methodologies; Four empirical case studies with additional national (Indonesian) validation processes</td>
<td>Building a knowledge base to support a national biosecurity body</td>
<td>Analysis and synthesis of findings, leading to a sound knowledge base to support national biosecurity policy development and coordination</td>
<td>Analysis and synthesis of targeted empirical research studies supplemented by national validation processes provides a strong evidence base for national policy formulation and implementation</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>5, 9, 11</td>
<td>(Guenther et al., 2017)</td>
<td>5 Case studies, 69 interviews</td>
<td>Remote Indigenous adult learning</td>
<td>Falsification and theory building as principles for policy and practice</td>
<td>Human capital theory fails to explain training and employment uptake in remote communities. Local ownership enhances training and employability.</td>
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Cumulative and compounding GQR
Designing for GQR

▷ Research design: From theory to contestation and confirmation or falsification → increasing probability that NTSs (assumptions) hold true
▷ Testing NTSs in other contexts
▷ Building a new old GC to answer previously unanswered questions
▷ Testing for truth: NTSs justified through consensus, correspondence, warrantability or coherence, depending on the nature of the evidence, the analytic process and the epistemological, ontological and cosmological positions taken.
So what can we conclude?

- There is ample justification for GQR from history, to avoid unhelpful binarized qual/quant distinctions and to avoid the need for self-justification along the lines of ‘we do so we can’.
- Shifting the definition of generalization from being a product to a process, part of a ‘generalization cycle’ allows us to design qual research for generalization.
- Creation of ‘Normative Truth Statements’ as part of GCs allows theory and empirical evidence to work together as a vehicle for GQR.
- The net result should be to increase the confidence research end users have in justifying applications based on qualitative research.
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