
GENERALIZABILITY

Drawing on the etymology of this term, *generalizability* refers to the ability of extending the validity of one's case study conclusions to other cases of the kind. More commonly, generalizability refers to a broad concern that arises when researchers have studied one or a few cases and ask: Do our findings, our insights, or our descriptions apply to other cases? Generalizability is thus more or less synonymous with the notion of external validity.

Many strategies have been proposed to support claims for generalizability. In fact, their legitimacy depends on the ontological assumption underpinning the research at hand, whether it be positivistic, realist, constructivist, or postmodern. While none of the proposed strategies are fully convincing, some researchers devote much energy to ensuring generalizability; others propose the reader is responsible for applying case study results to other case studies; and still others shrug off the question of generalizability, asserting its irrelevance for case study research. The question of the relevance of generalizability also highly depends on the reason researchers are interested in the case: Do they want to know more about the specific case itself, are they aiming at some general "truth," or do they want to dip into a specific case to foster an understanding of the complexity of given situations?

Conceptual Overview and Discussion

The notion of generalizability has long been a concern for survey researchers. When, for matters of feasibility, they need to confine the study to a sample, they want some assurance that the conclusions remain valid for the entire population. Many statistical tests have been designed to certify the possibility of the generalization of their results. But because a precondition for ensuring generalizability is a large sample size, which is unlikely when undertaking case study research, these statistical tests are not always feasible for case study research.

From a positivist approach, the researcher looks for correlations between phenomena or variables. The more general are the findings, the more valuable

is the research. In this endeavor, a case study can represent only a very small sample, exploring a new context, giving the "flesh" and the circumstances for a better interpretation of the correlation. But in order to ensure the generalizability of case study findings, further studies that rely on the same logics as survey research are required. A case study provides the exploratory phase of research upon which more extensive quantitative research can be based.

Most of the various strategies in case study research that act to ensure generalizability rest on realist ontological assumptions. This means that a reality is presupposed as existing underneath and underpinning the apparent world. A case study is one of the best of manners in which to access this underlying reality. Once this reality has been rendered visible and explainable thanks to one case study, the researcher seeks to verify the existence of that reality in other cases to assess the extent to which the findings are generalizable to a specified population. This process has been undertaken in research informed by realist ontological assumptions, including that of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, Robert Yin, and Haridimos Tsoukas.

From a constructivist approach, the researcher approaches his or her research on a given phenomenon with the assumption that the phenomenon as such exists only through his or her mental appreciation of it. Thus, from this approach, the researcher does not infer as to the possibility of generalizability. The reader must, however, assess whether the proposed insight may help him or her understand other cases of interest. This is one reason that Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba have proposed replacing the concern for generalizability with that of transferability. Robert Stake's as well as Robert Donmoyer's strategies have followed in the approach set out by Lincoln and Guba.

From a postmodern approach, the very existence of a "case" is put into question. The case is seen as a particular framing of the world that has no superiority over others, and that is often phallo-, ethno-, or logocentric. The case study becomes an opportunity to uncover the way in which we frame problems, representations, and power relations that a society and academic sphere impose. It enables the possibility of voicing and recognizing the silenced and unconsidered, and of addressing from a specific viewpoint generic problems of our society and our being-in-the-world.

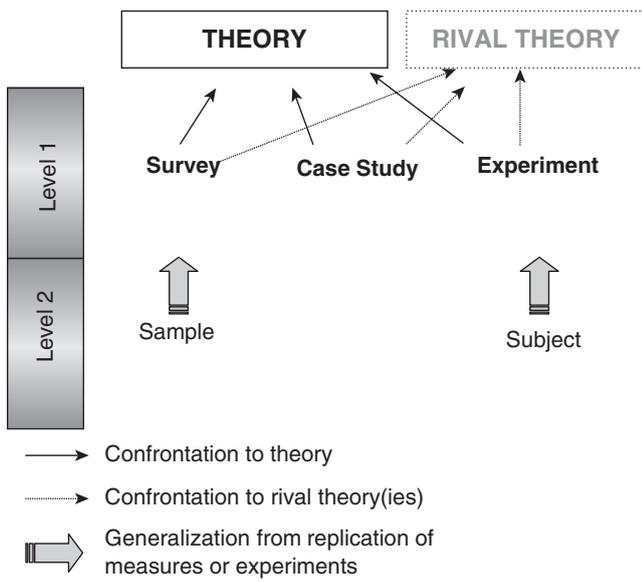


Figure 1 Statistical and analytic generalization

Source: Yin (2002).

Notes: Two levels of generalization, according to Yin. Analytic generalization refers to level 1, whereas statistical generalization is on level 2.

The question of generalizability is here downplayed in favor of the question of exemplarity and justice.

Application

As we have seen, there are several perspectives on generalizability that each offers a different strategy for claiming generalizability. Let's see the various rationales underlying these possible strategies. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, in their *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, have drawn a distinction between statistical and analytic generalization. On the one hand, statistical generalization infers from a sample of the characteristics of the whole population, requiring an interpretive second step from these characteristics to theory. On the other hand, an analytic generalization is a direct confrontation of the case study with an established theory (see the representation provided by Yin in Figure 1).

Drawing on the preceding distinction, Yin proposes that the researcher replicate his or her case study to a small number of cases where the conclusions are understood to fit and not to fit (e.g., one

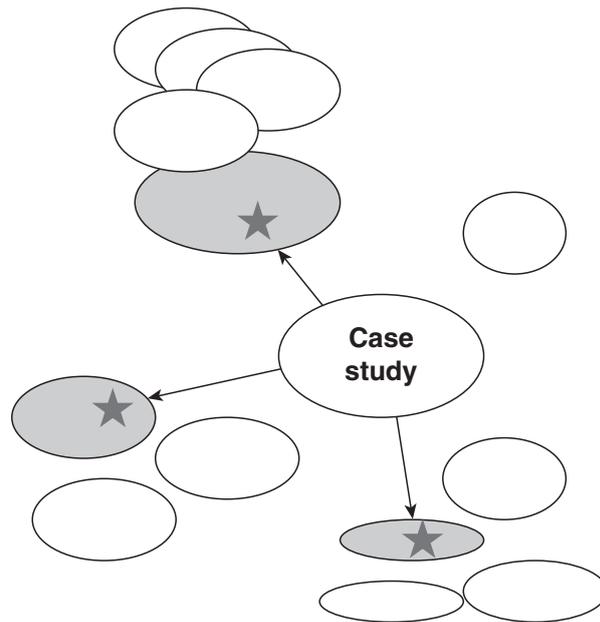


Figure 2 Generalization in grounded theory

Source: Glaser & Strauss (1967).

Notes: In the constant comparative method, conclusions are tested in a case of a near population in order to expand generalizability.

should study three or four cases where the conclusions can be seen to fit and not to fit). In the instance where the researcher finds cases in which the theory does not fit, it is up to the researcher to provide a theoretical explanation for the lack of reproducibility of the theory. This is done in hopes of rendering the conclusions more robust. At the end of the replication process, the conclusions can be said to be generalizable. If other researchers show the lack of application of the findings to other cases (where according to the theory it should), it is up to the previous researcher to provide an explanation that supports his or her observations as to why the conclusions were applicable. Through this progressive process, the generalizability of the results of one case study to other cases is rendered more precise.

Another strategy for increasing generalizability is provided by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. According to them, generalizability is to grow in "circles" (see Figure 2). The conclusions of one case study are tested in a slightly different setting, and then step by step to a larger circle of settings. For example, one could test the conclusions of a

given case in different federal departments of a federal agency, followed by different departments in different agencies, different regions of a nation, and, further to different nations. If the findings or the concepts are still valid after this process, it may be safe to assume the conclusions of a given case study are generalizable to a wider population. However, if the conclusions are not valid, then the conclusions must be amended so that they can apply to both the previous cases and the new environment. In the end, the concept or the theory will no longer be context specific, and the researcher ends up with a “substantive” (general) theory.

Haridimos Tsoukas proposes a more direct generalization strategy that is based on critical realism. According to him, the case study offers the opportunity to uncover the causal powers and generative mechanisms that reality imposes on the actual world we experience. Researchers seek out universal causal laws and necessary ways of acting. If the researcher has fostered a deep enough understanding of the reality of the situation at hand, then the said causal powers and generative mechanisms, because they represent the underlying reality, have a high degree of generalizability. If the generative mechanisms were not observed, it would be the researcher’s responsibility either to explain the obstruction or amend the theory. It must be noted that for a researcher to adopt this method of generalization, the researcher must be sympathetic to critical realist ontological assumptions.

Lincoln and Guba have objected to realist ontological assumptions. Instead, they impose upon the reader the charge of ensuring the generalization of the theory of question. Lincoln and Guba propose the image of a hologram in which each part contains all the features of the whole. Using this metaphor, they state that the case study contains all the features of the whole. That means that if the case is akin to a microcosm of the general, then what was observed and theorized in the case study has a certain degree of generalizability. Of course, the degree of generalizability will not be valid in every situation. If a reader wonders whether the conclusions apply to another situation, he or she is in charge of assessing whether or not this new situation pertains to the same whole of which the first case study is a hologramic piece. The reader would then not generalize the findings

to the new setting, but rather transfer them to this new setting to test their applicability.

Stake makes the case for a naturalistic generalization. Stake notes that, while studying the case, researchers gain a subjective understanding by recognizing their experience in the natural world. They may have the skill to help the reader in sensing the subjective understanding in question. These experiences are general by nature, even though they again may not be present in every situation. The value of the case study and its generalizability is confirmed when, if faced with a similar situation, the reader is able to recognize the resemblance of experience and is able to put it into practice. With a reversed logic, Robert Donmoyer advocates that the reading of a case study may make us live rather unfamiliar situations. Thus, we gain experiences that we could not have accessed otherwise. This knowledge will possibly be used, that is, transferred (generalized) to other situations. In these latter approaches, generalizability is not asserted or proved, but proposed as a possibility that the reader may find useful.

In a more postmodern strategy Jean-Luc Moriceau remarks that what will happen in other cases is not the same features, but a mix of sameness and difference. Repetition, a concept borrowed from Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition*, could be a more useful concept than generalization for thinking of external validity for case studies. Taking the singular case of the Enron collapse as an example, generalization would either mean that the same unethical behaviors would reoccur identically (what the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 was meant to prevent) or suggest that these are necessarily due to the inner structure of capitalism. Repetition would suggest that similar misdeeds will reoccur, but be full of dissimilar features. Problems are repeated, but new ways of dealing with them are constantly reinvented. Such a case study is rather meant to show problematics, raise questions, or describe possibilities than to bring a knowledge that would be valid, identically, in other settings.

Critical Summary

The notion of generalizability as it pertains to case study research is sometimes scorned by researchers who seek to establish correlations between large

numbers of instances. But this does not mean that a case study's external validity is weak. Rather, other generalization strategies have to be put forward. Yet, before generalizability can be sought, researchers must acknowledge the ontological assumptions of their research and find a method of generalization that is consistent with their assumptions.

However, one can also wonder whether the aim for case study research should be results in which generalizability is sought. First, it is questioned whether the aim for case study research be the generation of rich knowledge of a given phenomenon or less rich but generalizable knowledge of that phenomenon. Second, the case study method may seek other kinds of insights, a nonexhaustive list of which would include uncovering unjust relations or situations, the proposition of new ways of looking at situations, the better understanding of other beings in the world, or the power relations that are implied in a specific way of doing research.

Jean-Luc Moriceau

See also Analytic Generalization; Case Study and Theoretical Science; Genericization; Middle-Range Theory; Naturalistic Generalization; Number of Cases; Statistical Generalization

Further Readings

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