

Qualitative Generalizability

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Qual Health Res 1999 9: 5

DOI: 10.1177/104973299129121622

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EDITORIAL

Qualitative Generalizability

The generalizability of research findings has long been considered the prerogative of quantitative research. The selection of an adequate and random sample and the comparison of the study population with the sample have been techniques that permit the transference of the quantitative study results to the study population and to similar populations. Using this standard, qualitative research, with small and purposefully selected samples, has been considered nonrepresentative of the population and its findings not generalizable. Wiggling sideways at this obvious limitation, qualitative researchers, including Morse, declared that generalization was not the purpose of qualitative inquiry.

But we were wrong to ignore this criticism. If qualitative research is considered not generalizable, then it is of little use, insignificant, and hardly worth doing.

Of course, qualitative research is generalizable. Criterion for determining generalizability, however, differs from quantitative inquiry. Let us compare these two.

In both qualitative and quantitative studies, the goal is to modify theory and to transfer knowledge gained, but the means for determining this is different. In quantitative inquiry, comparability of the sample and the study population is ensured using demographic characteristics. If the demographic variables in the randomly selected sample are similar to those in the population, then it is *assumed* that the research findings from the sample would be similar to those from the entire population if the entire population was studied. In qualitative research, each participant in the relatively small sample has been selected purposefully for the contribution he or she can make toward the emerging theory. It is this selecting that ensures that the theory is comprehensive, complete, saturated, and accounts for negative cases. The knowledge gained from the theory should fit all scenarios that may be identified in the larger population. The theory also is applicable beyond this immediate group and is applicable to all similar situations, questions, and problems, regardless of the comparability of the demographic composition of the groups.

How does this work? There is an important example in grounded theory in which theory developed about becoming a nurse can be transferred to becoming a teacher (Glaser, 1978). It is the process that is applied to new conditions. My best example is a study on privacy investigated in an all-male nursing home (Applegate & Morse, 1994). In this ethnographic study, it was noted that respect for privacy norms occurred whenever people (nurses or residents) treated one another as they would treat a person—whether a friend or a stranger. If they treated one another as objects, then violation of privacy norms occurred. In other words, the type of interpersonal relations provided the context in which privacy norms were respected or violated.



How and to whom are these findings generalized? The answer is to any setting in which the problem of privacy violations is a concern. It does not matter that the initial study was conducted with elderly male residents—these findings may be generalized to a female oncology unit, to a psychiatric unit, or elsewhere. And with this knowledge, the change agent first looks at interpersonal relations. The knowledge gained is not limited to demographic variables; it is the fit of the topic or the comparability of the problem that is of concern. Recall it is the knowledge that is generalized.

Once qualitative researchers recognize that qualitative findings are generalizable, qualitative research will be considered appropriately and more useful, more powerful, and more significant. Qualitative research will be more readily funded, more frequently cited, and more often incorporated into practice.

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Editor

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