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Naturalistic Generalization

Naturalistic generalization is a process where readers gain insight by reflecting on the details and descriptions presented in case studies. As readers recognize similarities in case study details and find descriptions that resonate with their own experiences; they consider whether their situations are similar enough to warrant generalizations. Naturalistic generalization invites readers to apply ideas from the natural and in-depth depictions presented in case studies to personal contexts.

Conceptual Overview and Discussion

Generalizing findings from research, either by receiving explicated or propositional understanding deductively from quantitative experiments; or by constructing tacit interpretive understanding inductively from qualitative inquiries: involves a transfer of knowledge from a study sample to another population. Unlike objective scientific generalization, naturalistic generalization generates possibilities for transferring knowledge more privately from subjective accounts such as case studies or stories.

Deborah Trumbull and Robert Stake introduced the term naturalistic generalization. Stake and Trumbull believed that generalizations can be made about particulars. They suggested that in

addition to learning from explicated generalizations, individuals also learn from the generalizations they make during their everyday experiences as well as from the authors, teachers and authorities in their lives. In Stake's view, naturalistic generalizations are conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life's affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to them. Naturalistic generalization emphasizes practical, functional application of research findings that intuitively fall naturally in line with readers' ordinary experiences.

Discussing how naturalistic generalizations enable the reader to achieve personal understandings, Lincoln and Guba's 1985 work noted that this form of generalization builds on readers' tacit knowledge. In Lincoln and Guba's view, naturalistic generalizations permit detailed probing of an instance in question rather than mere surface description. As readers consider the in-depth particulars described in case studies, they may view similar circumstances in their lives with new empathy and intentionality.

Building on the idea of naturalistic generalization, Lincoln and Guba's 1985 work further established the concept of transferability, (where a hypothesis developed in one context can be transferred to another context) and the concept of fittingness (where a hypothesis from one context is sufficiently congruent or 'fits' in another). Naturalistic generalizations, transferability and fittingness all rely on researchers to provide readers with the thick description and vicarious experiential accounts they need to determine if and how they will use the information in their own lives. These more interpretive processes of generalizing findings, with their heavy

dependence on context and reader responsibility, are considered different from traditional scientific generalizations.

However, in 2008, Hellström argued that naturalistic generalization, transferability and fittingness are well accommodated within already established ways of thinking about generalizing statements from one setting to another. Hellström asserted that it is premature to view these interpretive processes as a break with received scientific traditions. Rather, his examination of the philosophical roots of generalization concluded that most forms of generalization require researchers to organize and present their findings in ways that indicate priority points. He asserted that it is the generalization implicit in the thick description which licenses, or even models the temporal sequences of causal propagation through the story/case. So, while aspects of naturalistic generalization clearly differ from other forms of generalization, all generalizations share the common goal of deepening understanding by transferring knowledge from a study sample to another population of interest.

Application

Naturalistic generalization is embedded within readers' personal and unique experiences. Small sample sizes, even single cases, can inform and enlighten. Application stems from readers themselves. In order to assist readers' application and creation of their own personal and relevant naturalistic generalizations, in his 1995 text, Stake emphasized that case researchers need to provide opportunity for vicarious experience. Accounts need to be personal, describing the things of our sensory experiences, not failing to attend to the matters that personal curiosity dictates. A

narrative account, a story, a chronological presentation, personalistic description, emphasis on time and place provide rich ingredients for vicarious experience. Stake emphasized that time, place and person are the first three major steps. Additionally, Stake underscored the point that although the researcher is not responsible for directing readers' naturalistic generalizations, it is a responsibility researchers must not ignore.

One seminal example where ethnographic researchers presented a vicarious account that has stimulated readers' naturalistic generalizations for nearly fifty years is *Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School,* authored by Howard Becker, Blanche Geer, Everett Hughes, and Anselm Strauss in 1961. This case presented readers with a clear picture of the socialization and assimilation processes that student physicians experienced in the 1950's and 1960's. At the time, physicians were believed to be part of a fairly closed group. The detailed depictions of how students interacted with peers and faculty; how they integrated into the hierarchical hospital systems; and how they became immersed in their new professional culture offers readers very personal illustrations that can be immediately visualized and understood. Professors instructing medical and other health care professionals continue to include this case in their curricula. The naturalistic generalizations that students and teachers can still draw from this powerful story remain relevant despite the current shift towards gender equality and professional transparency in health care fields.

Another example where a case study researcher presented a vicarious account that stimulated readers' naturalistic generalizations is *What Children Bring to Light: A Constructivist*

Perspective on Children's Learning in Science, authored by Bonnie Shapiro in 1994. This longitudinal piece presents readers with stories of six children in an elementary school science class as they study the topic of 'light.' The stories view the world through the eyes of the children. The cases offer poignant insight into how children bring existing knowledge to science class; how they view their participation in class activities; and how they reflect on the information later. Educators involved with science curricula, those who are interested in engagement with science learning and those who are interested in how children learn can readily and naturally translate these cases into their own day to day experiences.

Critical Summary

The goal of naturalistic generalization is not for researchers to prescribe conclusions. Rather, readers can gauge how and in what ways the particular details and stories presented in case studies may be applicable to their own situations. Sample sizes need not be large. Practical insights from narrative descriptions can evolve naturally and then be transferred or generalized to comparable situations.

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See also: intuitive generalization, transferability, fittingness

Further reading and references

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