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Generalizing: The descriptive struggle

Barney G. Glaser, Ph.D.; Hon Ph.D.

The literature is not kind to the use of descriptive generalizations. Authors struggle and struggle to find and rationalize a way to use them and then fail in spite of trying a myriad of work-arounds. And then we have Lincoln and Guba's famous statement: "The only generalization is: there is no generalization" in referring to qualitative research. (op cit, p. 110) They are referring to routine QDA yielding extensive descriptions, but which tacitly include conceptual generalizations without any real thought of knowledge about them.

In this chapter I wish to explore this struggle for the purpose of explaining that the various contra arguments to using descriptive generalizations DO NOT apply to the ease of using conceptual generalizations yielded in SGT and especially FGT. I will not argue for the use of descriptive generalization. I agree with Lincoln and Guba with respect to QDA, "the only generalization is: there is no generalization." It is up to the QDA methodologists, of whom there are many; to continue the struggle and I wish them well.

The Descriptive Generalization Struggle

Most, if not all, qualitative research method writers talk of the near impossibility to generalize as they struggle to make descriptive generalizations realistic. Most fail.

There are several dimensions to this struggle which help explain the struggle and then the failure. Their principal concerns of descriptive generalization are worrisome accuracy of descriptions which soon become stale dated, transferability, internal vs. external validity, unit comparisons to determine similarity and differences (not for concepts), unit comparability for transferability, volume solutions (the more units the better), downing abstract leveling of SGT to a local description, and can a descriptive generalization become a scientific law. The reader may think of more, but considering these dimensions will give the idea that the descriptive generalization struggle is never solved

and it does not apply to conceptual generalization. Indeed, focusing on descriptive generalization in the struggle has two negative consequences: 1. conceptual generalizations are missed or passed over and 2. They leave the substantive fields involved open to speculative theory. I will consider these dimensions in linear fashion keeping in mind they are highly interrelated.

The writers I refer to are Lincoln and Guba (op cit, chapter 5), Ian Dey (op cit, chapter 11), Janet Ward Schofield, "Increasing the Generalizability of Qualitative Research" in Miles and Huberman, The Qualitative Researchers Companion, (op cit, chapter 8), Margaret Kearny, "New Directions in Grounded Formal Theory" in *Using GT in Nursing*,) op cit, chapter 12), and Glaser, "Conceptual Generalizing" in the *GT Perspective I*, chapter 7, and Joy L. Johnson, "Generalizability in Qualitative Research," Chapter 10. The many other writers such as Creswell, Silverman, Walcott, Morse, Schutt, etc, on qualitative methodology deal with the struggle to generalize but in less than a chapter focused way. See bibliography for this book.

Missing conceptual generalization: One major source of the descriptive generalization struggle is the down leveling of SGT by the remodeling impact of QDA on GT. (See *GT Perspective II: Description Remodeling of GT*). What occurs is that QDA forces a description out of GT and/or GT is taken as description, not as theory. It becomes local to the area of research. Descriptive generalization becomes the problem. The quest is to see if the description applies to another area, if the area is comparable on enough dimensions. The pressure to generalize releases a fearful caution of generalizing descriptions as the research seems particularistic, not general. The fear is turned into keeping the particular description special, possessed, savored and uniquely original. Hopefully it is possessed for colleague respect and career purposes. And by the time the research gets published a year or so later, the description is stale dated, the research site changed, thus even less generalizable.

It is no wonder that conceptual generalizing and general implications of the core category is missed totally as the down leveling descriptive struggle continues. It is no wonder that the enduring grab of GT categories over time and place is lost and their power to explain is lost, since the focus is so strongly on the struggle to use the description elsewhere, or to block it. Keep in mind that SGT is not a site description; it is, when done right, a

conceptual theory, which generalizes with ease. Missing the conceptual nature of GT in total favor of QDA description is clear in the following critique of GT generalizations by Ian Dey "Thus the logic of discovery justifies procedures that maximize the production of new ideas. But the same procedures do not provide a strong basis for generalizing these ideas to particular populations." (op cit, p. 38) Further he says "Glaser and Strauss legitimate such generalization by linking formal theory closely with the substantive studies through which it is both generated and applied. Nevertheless, there seem to be problems with the use of grounded theory for generalizations. At least three such problems stand out. One is the preference to sample situation and processes rather than cases. This may make it difficult to locate the resulting theory in its local context, and take this into account when generalizing. A second is the use of theoretical sampling to select these situations and processes. This tends to leave open the question of how representative these may be. A third is the temptation to generalize without reference to the specific spatial and temporal context with which the generalization may apply (ibid, p. 246).

Dey is clearly focused on the requirements of descriptive generalization, and misses that SGT and FGT are conceptual, not descriptive, and deal with conceptual generalization. Criticism "one" clearly focuses on the descriptive need to sample for description for a specific situation or context in order to describe it well. Dey localizes GT, thus losing its conceptual abstraction from time, place and people, by turning it into a description of just what it is abstract of.

Criticism "two" continues this descriptive claim by wanting theoretical sampling for data to abide by the rules of representation clearly for describing a unit accurately. Theoretical sampling is too "anywhere" as concepts drive it to "wherever" for more data, to generate more conceptualization. Again he localizes GT by down leveling it to a description of a unit, which description is not carefully representative by using theoretical sampling. He misses totally the idea that GT is involved in conceptual development and using the interchangeability of indicators and theoretical saturation, to stop the excessive collection of data, required in QDA description.

Criticism "three" acknowledges the pressure to generalize, but cautions against it if the original substantive area was not

properly described by representative sampling. Once again a QDA requirement for accurate description. He misses the conceptual generation of GT by theory driven sampling and then when applying the concept, conceptually contextualizing it with emergent fit. His contextualizing is down leveling GT to description. Contextualizing comes after the GT generation, not before as a description. After application then contextualizing a concept earns relevance with emergent fit. Remember that SGT and FGT originally come from data, but it gets applied to data when used.

Focusing on descriptive generalization and missing conceptual generalization leads Dey to this confused paragraph. "Thus the problem of producing theory that is complex and parsimonious is not so much resolved as recast in a new guise … the distinction between substantive and formal theory allows complexity in the generation of theory to be condensed into a more parsimonious formulation at a formal level. Theoretical reduction allows the elimination of superfluous specificity in the construction of generalizations. Focusing on a core category allows the research to set some boundaries to the analysis." (p. 45) Extending the general implications of a core category by FGT does not entail the reduction or increase in complexity and parsimony, or the theory. Description would do this. Conceptualization, as one goes from substantive to FGT, is emergent in either direction. There is no preconceived "trade off between complexity and parsimony in the process of conceptualization" as Dey says. It is emergent.

Dey concludes this chapter with a descriptive conclusion about GT: "In grounded theory the emphasis on comparison across a range of "areas of inquiry" (not cases) may preclude effective study of any particular phenomenon…. Grounded theory offers a way of producing generalizations through comparison." (p. 229) He faults GT for not producing a fully accurate description of an area, missing the conceptual concern of the area, while even mentioning that its focus is on conceptual generalizations, "by reducing the rigor by relaxing the canons of comparative inquiry." So in realizing what GT does, it is critiqued by descriptive canons. Clearly, the struggle for descriptively generalizing dismisses conceptual generalization. Faulting GT with comparative inquiry that conceptualizes instead of comparative inquiry that describes differences and similarities

again dismisses conceptual work. The power, use and grab of GT, whether SGT or FGT is subverted without cause.

Generalizing in QDA research is tedious and tenuous. The struggle can be so intense that others discount descriptive generalizations as irrelevant. "For some qualitative researchers, questions of generalizability are seen as irrelevant. 'Naturalists eschew generalizations on the grounds that virtually all social/behavioral phenomena are contexts bound' (Guba, op cit, p. 81). Generalizability simply is ignored or dismissed as an oppressive, positivistic concept that hampers creative and emancipatory qualitative research…. The tendency to reject generalizability has to be their close alignment with (research) which focuses on the study of unique cultures." (Joy Johnson "Generalizability in Qualitative Research" in C*ompleting a Qualitative Project*, (chapter 10, Sage 1997). Joy closes this thought about descriptive generalizing with the bear recognition of conceptual generalization by quoting Guba (1985) "to generalize one must develop abstract theories, yet abstractions are not well grounded in what informants experience and think". She suggests using GT to obtain these abstractions. This thought is close but does not go far enough to push for FGT.

It is simply true that QDA research gives new perspectives on what is going on in a situation. It gives understanding, if not grounded theory explanation of how the main concern is continually processed. This descriptive perspective is abetted by the natural tendency to over generalize particularistic and speculative views as lessons on supposed patterns, not truly grounded. Over generalizing broad statements, based on particularistic limited assumptions and information, emerge to achieve a credible, but unattainable goal to look like a scientific law. Sometimes findings and criteria from quantitative studies are used to broaden the credibility of the generalizations, since the broad sampling and volume give the appearance of tapping general descriptions. The unwavering rules of quantitative validity when applied to QDA do not, in and of themselves, generate descriptive generalizations that last. These efforts at descriptive struggle for generalization ignore, waylay or dismiss the ease and application of conceptual generalization.

The struggle for descriptive generalizations is described by Johnson as follows: "It is clear that different qualitative approaches are aimed at developing different kinds of knowledge.

It is therefore inappropriate to assume that it is possible to develop a generic set of procedures for enhancing generalizability across all forms of qualitative research. All approaches and strategies involve assumptions, judgments and compromises: all are claimed to have deficiencies. The challenge for researchers is to be aware of those deficiencies and to refrain from making claims (generalizations) that extend beyond the purview of the research study." (Johnson, op cit, p. 203) "It is for the researcher to be clear about the aim of the study and how the findings may apply across settings, person and time." (p. 205) Johnson again closes with a slight recognition of conceptual generalization, when she says. "The theory (referring to GT) if it has been developed in a rigorous manner, is applicable across numerous kinds of person and contexts," but there is no follow through to fostering doing SGT or FGT.

All the articles referred above show the struggle for descriptive generalization, but the classic one is the chapter by Lincoln and Guba stating the only generalization is that there is no generalization. I said above that I agree and will detail more reasons why in several subsequent sections in this chapter. Here I want to underscore that the L&G struggle fails because they look for unreachable truths and scientific laws as their goal, whereas other strugglers do not. They discuss many ways that QDA descriptions are not possible to generalize. This extreme requirement for descriptive generalizations steers them far from realizing the power of conceptual generalizations.

Additionally their struggle misses conceptual generalization because they reduce GT to a description. They say "GT is local theory as it brings together and systematizes isolated, individual theory. Local understanding, aggregated leads to partial understanding." Lincoln and Guba reverse the escape from time, place and people of conceptual generalization to wanting to contextualize the GT and make it a unit description. Thus they completely miss GT's conceptual power of generalization by missing that the constant comparative method yields concepts. It does not yield similarities and differences leading to and for description. They see GT as just another description of a locale or context. What could have saved their struggle for generalization is steered to assure failure of the struggle.

At least Schofield (in Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Research Companion*, Sage 2002, p.191–193) gives descriptive

generalization a bit of success by saying it is always conditional, provisional and particularistic. She tries to revive the demise of descriptive generalization by such conditions. Her struggle is a stretch to use them, but still a mild failure. Her struggle, as is typical, steers her clear of realizing conceptual generalizations exist and are generated by SGT and especially FGT. She says: "Although qualitative researches have traditionally paid scant attention to the attaining of generalizability, sometimes even disdaining such a goal, this situation has changed noticeably in the past ten to fifteen years. A consensus appears to be emerging that for qualitative researchers, generalizability is best thought of as a matter of the 'fit' between the situation studied and the other to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusions of that study. This conceptualization makes thick description crucial…" So near and yet so far from GT, since comparative description is the goal not conceptualization to as she says "achieve generalizability through the aggregation of extant independently designed case studies." She says "structuring qualitative studies in a way that enhances their implication for the understanding of another situation," but it is all comparative description.

She is so near and yet so far from comparing for generating conceptual generalizations. The descriptive struggle blinds researchers to conceptual ease. The descriptive struggle is the norm and one property of it is that it is perpetual. There are lots of close calls, but the struggle diverts the best researchers to the standard arguments of descriptive generalization, which arguments are then doomed to failure. One among many reasons is that comparisons are not made for conceptualization. They are made for showing differences and similarities among units, thus brought down to pure description. For example, as Schofield says: "there is another approach to increasing the generalizability of qualitative case studies that should not be ignored.… finding ways to aggregate, compare or contrast already existing studies." Clearly, she is so close to conceptual comparison, but diverted to descriptive comparisons.

The diversion to descriptive generalizations also have the effect of subverting the GT requirement of letting the problem emerge and not studying the literature of the field before the research so as not to preconceive and force. The descriptive generalization steers researchers to the professional problem and

to study the literature on it first before the research in order to get a descriptive need for more research to fill in gaps. Fine, this is pure QDA research, which by far outnumbers GT research.

The descriptive quest gets easily framed by the speculative theory of scholarly great men/women which subsequently legitimizes it. In spite of the resulting struggle to generalize, GT is totally subverted by this pattern. And the researcher finds himself working on the speculative concepts of these great men. Paradoxically, the researcher is back to conceptualization. But it is not grounded; rather it is conjecture brought on by the orientation to and requirement of descriptive generalization, for example see Dey (op cit, p.265) on the leveling of abstraction. This leveling poses an interesting problem and paradox, since these QDA authors know descriptive generalizations do not hold up, yet they have no grasp of conceptual generalizations.

I am not saying descriptive generalizations are to be avoided; they are just another focus of research. See Mark Granovetter: "Finding a Job: 2nd edition" (Univ of Chicago Press, 1995) for a masterful comparison of his study to others based on differences and similarities. His writing is laced with conjectural accounting for the findings leading to strained struggle for descriptive generalization. Our focus in this book is the conceptual grounded generation of the general implications of a substantive core category into a FGT which is clearly quite a different research goal. Needless to say under the notion that people generalize naturally, there are those who do it descriptively by nature and those who do it conceptually by nature. And of course, this is another source of scant attention to FGT.

In sum, the unit oriented struggle to descriptive generalization is never satisfactory. It is too absolute, too factual, too philosophical by conjectural accountings, too inclusive in the need to account for everything and too argumentative to try to do it and thusly further driving the researcher to intuitive, conjectural remarks and the borrowings of grand speculative theory. No wonder that some QDA researchers thoroughly dislike descriptive generalizations and seek only pure description. Descriptive generalization never really works. The reader should read the full articles referred to above to witness the struggle for him/herself. In other published sources the struggle is in sections.

I turn now to looking at the elements of descriptive

generalizations which make them so unsatisfactory. These are problems that conceptual generalization does not have. I will deal with transferability, external vs. internal validity, worrisome accuracy and single case studies. The reader should keep in mind I only touch on these topics enough as regards the generalization struggle. I do not give the full coverage the literature does, which the reader can easily search for. I will close this chapter with a section on conceptual comparison contrasted with descriptive generalizing.

Transferability

Generalization implies the transferability of a finding from one context or unit to another as valid. This makes the finding a descriptive generalization. But is transferability possible? It depends. "The level of generalizability depends entirely on the sampling scheme used and on the demographic resemblance between sample and target population" (Dahlgren, p. 50.) Using face sheet data to establish sufficient resemblance between context assumes a relevance that may not exist, hence demographic resemblance between units may be of no relevance.

Using face data is often an effort to not only transfer the finding to a similar unit, but to a larger unit. Thus a small study is generalized to a much larger population based on demographic data. For example, a study of one nursing school is generalized to nursing training throughout the nation. This kind of descriptive generalization is especially jeopardous, since the larger population brings in so much atypicality that the larger population is just largely different even though compared to a few similarities.

How does one make units similar enough to transfer a finding from one to the other? At the other end from demographic similarity is judgment and logical reasoning, which Dahlgren calls "analytic generalization" (op cit, p. 51). There is no demographic resemblance between study unit and target unit. It is the fit of the researched problem to the new unit that is generalized. It is the comparability of the topic or the problem that is of concern. This borders on conceptual generalization, but only if it does not drop to the descriptive level and the problem is fully conceptualized in a GT. In the hands of a QDA researcher it will indeed drop in level of abstraction.

In between demographic and analytic generalizations is

comparative description of differences and similarities trying to make more of the similarities than the differences to justify transferability. Sometimes different cases are just likened with little comparison. But no matter what technique is used to justify a transfer of a finding from one unit to another, it is never totally justified or works. It is always a struggle with a level of unsatisfactory outcome. The transferred to unit is never known about fully enough to sharpen the similarities. The researcher cannot research every unit fully like the initially researched unit. Thick descriptions (Geetz 1973) are not the answer as it leads to overload of clarity. Furthermore descriptions of units do not stand still, they do not endure; they become stale dated at whatever pace. Thus even a cogent transfer of a finding between units, making it general, is likely to be short lived and of limited enduring value. The effort to make the transfer between unit types based on descriptions is still doomed, since they are destined to become stale dated.

Conceptual generality has none of these problems. It is just applied and conceptually modified by contextualization that varies the categories to fit. Variation in unit resemblance is just grist for modifying the concepts of the theory. For example (and I could give many) our theory of awareness of dying was based on four contexts. Then we went to the premature baby ward and discovered awareness was not an issue, the patients could not hear their prognosis. Thus it was a totally open context and the new concept was the hearability of patients.

Dahlgren et al (p. 52) agree with me, when they say: "In conceptual qualitative research, such as *Grounded Theory*, the results have transcended the empirical data. Here analytic generalizations make sense." Dahlgren et al, do research on international health problems in which generalizations between very different units are vitally needed irrespective of demographics or similarities and difference, such as the study of spousal abuse in "wherever" nations.

The applicability of GT, especially FGT, can be used wisely by informed laymen, e.g. client, and by other GT researchers using emergent fit in application. The generalizing is located by applicability not by descriptive commonalities. The generalizing is never a factual transfer, as in description, it is just multiple, integrated conceptual hypotheses modified to fit where applied by using constant comparison to conceptualize the modified fit,

workability and relevance.

This kind of generalizing is not only easy with some thoughtful work, but is fun, as it feels good to have a conceptual grasp on what is going on. For example, when one knows the subcore categories of credentializing it is fun to see how they vary in different credentializing contexts. Like, what kinds of reading and lectures are involved, how long is the schooling (2 weeks to 10 years, so to speak), what kinds of final tests, what are entry procedures, how much active experience, what kinds of final legitimating ceremonies and so forth. I have seen the study of worsening progression in many other areas such as chronic illness, acute illness, smoking or other drug excesses, super normalizing denial, excessive exercising and on and on. The conceptual general implications of core categories know no bounds in transferability, and the problems of descriptive generalization for conceptual generalizations are moot.

Internal vs. External Validity

The transferability of descriptive findings to other units brings on the fundamental problem of internal vs. external validity. This demand on transferability usually dooms the descriptive generalization from the start. Internal validity means generalizing from a small study to all the people in the unit or context studied. The boundaries remain the same, thus it is cogent to generalize a finding to all involved. External validity means transferring the finding to a different unit. External validity, as we have seen above on transferability, raises the suspicion that the finding cannot be legitimately transferred because of grave differences in the 'transferred to' new unit.

One author suggests making the new unit typical regarding the finding being transferred or better do multiple studies of numerous new units for description generalization of qualitative data. (RK Schutt, *Investigating the Social World*, Pine Forge Press by Sage 2004, p. 154) This struggle is clear, especially the limited by time and expense approach of doing multiple studies. It is especially clear by Schutt's half page mention of the dangers of qualitative descriptive generalizability compared to six pages on the generalizability of quantitative surveys and experiments using random sampling for participants. Yet volunteer participant experiments are suspect. The argument for external transfers of descriptions increases in intensity the less it is

doable, therefore suggesting suspicion of or raising doubts of transferability. Regarding external validity, "The criterion of transferability is easily met in GT because Grounded Theory almost automatically transfers findings" (Dahgren, op cit, p. 56). The automatic transfer comes from the emergent fit of fit, workability and relevance achieved by the constant comparative method. The criterion of credibility is to a large degree irrelevant in a SGT and FGT, once the GT is seen to fit work and be relevant in another area.

A student wrote me (Judith Holton, 2/23/03,) "I believe that there is another way in which GT is transferable and in a way that is closer to the notion of external validity. The sociologist as theorist provides this theoretical abstraction in many ways when the theory fits, works and is relevant." She is quite right. The layman in the know spots these criteria instantly when the theory he hears rings true and relevant. ""That's right, that's the way it is" are comments we often hear upon presenting SGT to the knowledgeable. These people then transfer the theory and apply it. This is a type of generalizing (transferring) which is done by laymen in the substantive areas which is quite different than the researcher applying a GT for a client by consultation. Here the layman applies it himself. "This aspect of transferability is a very strong advantage for GT."

Hans Thulesius experiences immediate seeing his GT core category by others all the time when he gives a lecture to other MDs on his GT on balancing palliative care. The MDs see it immediately as "it works" and they want more. It engenders spill relief — that's what is going on! It engenders an imagery that endures forever. It imbues thought and further interventions. It helps the intelligent layman "go conceptual" without losing site of the ground. This applicability whether by researcher or layman occurs by the reversibility of the interchangeability of indicators in the original GT. That is more indictors of the same latent pattern are seen as the path to the applied to next unit or context, so it applies with conceptual modification. Odis Simmons' theory of "grounded action" leans heavily on this empirical tie to the next unit.

Qualitative research design planning is sometimes based on the possible future external validity of the yet to come findings. The planning questions are many. What is the best population to interview, how deep should the interviews be, versus more

extensive coverage, how much direct observation is advisable, what kind of "truths" or goal is desired, what kind of data best suits the wanted generalizations, what kind of qualitative method is best used, should a few quantitative measures be used especially for face sheet data. These are but a few of the questions bearing on external validity.

Furthermore one author added to these routine research design issues, how can the "fit be shown with the reality of the wider world" by "involving a larger number of people" which is a "tension" for qualitative researchers. (see *Social Research: The Basics:* David and Sutton, Sage, 2004, p. 28) These are several of the research design problems for the external validity goal. Internal validity is less problematic, as it seems normal to generalize to a larger number of people in the same population being studied. David and Sutton further talk of depth validity when it comes to internal validity. They say: "qualitative research is associated with the prioritization of depth validity over generalization." (p. 34) Whatever the take on it, both forms of validity are a struggle.

Maxwell highlights internal validity because he sees the lack of trust in external validity. He says: "Internal generalizability in this sense is far more important for most qualitative researchers than external generalizability because qualitative researchers rarely make explicit claims about the external generalizability of their accounts. Indeed the value of a qualitative study may depend on its lack of external generalizability. Thus internal generalizability is a crucial issue in interpreting interviews." (Miles and Huberman, op cit, p. 54) He talks of how a researcher cannot observe it all and interview everyone "even in one small setting" thus some sort of generalization to a larger population is needed. Hence internal validity predominates since it is safer to generalize to similar people and situations, rather than take on the challenge of external validity which includes total strangers. Whatever the take on it, both forms of validity are a struggle.

Denzin and Guba detail Sartre, 1981, in their "soft" view of internal validity. They say, "that no individual or case is ever just an individual or case. It must be studied as a single instance of more universal social experiences and social processes…. Thus to study the particular is to study general. For this reason, any case will necessarily bear the traces of the universal. The researcher assumes that the reader will be able to generalize subjectively or

"naturally" from the case in question to their own experiences." ("Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry," Sage 1998, op cit, p. xiv ,xv). All I can say is of course people generalize naturally, BUT that is not science. And the natural generalization is usually conceptual, but D&G do not recognize this. So close a realization to seeing conceptual generalization as the answer, but again a miss.

Denzin and Guba in another paper (p. 288), in reference to "critical trustworthiness" they say, "… critical researchers reject the traditional notion of external validity. The ability to make pristine generalizations from one research study to another accepts a one dimensional cause-effect universe. Many critical researchers have argued that this traditionalist concept of external validity is far too simplistic and assert that if generalizations are to be made — that is, if researchers are to be able to apply a finding of context A to context B — then we must be sure that the contexts being compared are similar." Again descriptive struggle demands comparative descriptions of similarities and differences.

As D&G say, researchers learn a lot from these comparisons, but cannot safely generalize them. Although they tacitly recognize conceptual generalization by acknowledging "in everyday situations men and women do not make generalization in ways implied by external validity.... They reshape cognitive structures to accommodate unique aspects of what they perceive in new contexts." (p. 288). So they essentially state that everyday persons contextualize the natural need to generalize. But they miss the power of conceptual generalization, yet are so close. Descriptive capture wins again. (See GT Perspective I, Glaser, 2001)

Anssi Perakyla struggles heroically to make conversation analytic research generalizable in terms of external validity. ("Reliability and Validity in Research Based on Natural Social Interaction", in Silverman editor, *Qualitative Research Companion*, Sage 2004, p.266–268) First she doubts the generalizability to other cases and then she discovers its possibility if one takes exact descriptions and sees them as comparative possibilities in other units. Thus she comes close to conceptual generalization, but misses it. She says: "A crucial dimension of validity of research concerns the generalizability of research findings. How wide can the results from relatively small samples be generalized. The comparative approach directly

tackles the question of generalizability by demonstrating the similarities and differences across a number of settings … whether the results present in studies are in any way generalizable. Are they particular to a site or do the results have some wider relevance. The possibilities of various practices can be considered generalizable even if the practices are not actualized in similar ways across different settings….As possibilities, the practices that are analyzed are very likely to be generalizable, not as a description of what other counselors or professionals do with their clients, but they were generalizable as description of what other professionals can do with his or her clients." Sure, possibilities on the conceptual level deal in probabilities, but she cannot get off the descriptive level and label her practices conceptually. So there is just struggle … when she is so near.

Dey's (op cit, p. 219) approach to external validity is that of bounded generalizations. They are never free of time and place, but always bounded. He says: "Generalization about society or social interaction must always be bounded by space and time. Thus generalizations apply neither to the particular nor to the eternal, but to events within some implicitly bounded space and time in which they are assumed to occur." Thus on the verge as seeing them conceptually they must be described by a space and time. Descriptive capture wins and we thusly have bounded descriptive generalizations. Bounded generalizations supposedly add to their external validity. Conceptual generalizations get applied to a space and time, they are not described by them. Bounded generalizations reverse contextualization in order to stay with description.

The arguments for or against descriptive validity whether internal or external are legion. The reader need only check the index of any of the myriad of QDA methods books to see the pages on generalization and witness the constant struggle. I have only given examples here to give the reader the image of this struggle. Careful grounded conceptual generalizations apply with ease, or without struggle.

Worrisome Accuracy

In the Grounded Theory Perspective I: Conceptualization *Contrasted with Description*, I discussed at length the QDA methodologist's concern with the accuracy of data collected in qualitative research. I called it worrisome accuracy. They are

never sure the descriptions are trustworthy, credible, testable, stale dated or confirmable. They engage in audit and member checks to assure accuracy. They see much of their data as interpreted — the constructivists — and interpretations vary, which confounds any assurance of accuracy. What truths or better yet what version of the truths is the researcher collecting and reporting? What is described as "real" findings can always be challenged. Given these constant doubts, how could a researcher possibly generalize a descriptive finding with any confidence other readers will accept it. What is fact for some is fantasy for others. Transferability and validity of descriptive generalization unit to unit are continually suspect and even seen as stale dated. Dey agrees when he says: "Events are shaped by people with their own particular perceptions, purposes and projects. However GT seems to offer a way out of this impasse." (p. 213.)

As I said in *GT Perspective I*, p. 50, "this tyranny of the QDA quest for collecting accurate data is replaced in GT by the conceptual coding of interchangeable indicators. The concepts soon become abstract of time, place and people as they emerge. When applied the concepts are easily modified by what ever context they are applied to using the constant comparative method to produce sub concepts. Modification, not verification, yields credibility. The freedom and power of these concepts is amazing and they yield conceptual generalizations, begging for general implications and emergent fit. As I have said many times in this book, core categories can be seen operating virtually everywhere, whether by natural views or by further research for FGT.

One standard strategy to assuage worrisome accuracy is to test the finding. And then of course can the reader believe the test procedure. The struggle continues. Donald Cressey in his book *Other People's Money* (1953, p. 156) rambles over this problem in his conclusions. He says: "the search for negative cases guided the research in all its phases and often a case which is clearly exceptional to the theory has not been located. To the question of whether negative evidence has been neglected or unwittingly distorted, there is no positive answer. The fact that our first hypothesis was revised several times before the final generalization could be formulated implies that the final generalization also must be revised if negative cases appear. In other words, the testing of the theory must remain as somewhat

inconclusive in a single case study. The final test will be the cumulative results of attempts at proof and disproof in research which follows … crucial negative cases which, if found, will require revision of the theory toward a more efficient formulation."

Thus negative finding test, to assure some accuracy, never really works. This type of test just shows the perpetually found inaccuracy of descriptive generalizations. Revision of the theory by new researches is perpetually doomed by comparative description, unlike the modification of a SGT by conceptual comparison. The latter just adds more sub-concepts to the emerging FGT as it is theoretically sampled for in new researches.

Miles and Huberman in their classic book *Qualitative Data Analysis* (Sage 1994, p. 263) talk of several ways of testing or confirming findings for generalization. Their prescriptions are numerous and beyond the resources and skill of most researchers. They say: "Data quality can be assessed through checking for representativeness (1) checking for researcher effects on the case, and vice versa, (2) triangulating across data sources and methods, (3) weighting the evidence and (4) deciding which kinds of data are most trustable. Looking at 'unpatterns' can tell us a lot. Checking the meaning of outliers, (5) using extreme cases, (6) following up surprises, and (7) looking for negative evidence, are all tactics that test a 'pattern' by saying what it is not like. We can also test our explanations by making if-then tests (9) replicating a finding, (10) ruling out spurious relations and (11) checking out rival explanations. Finally, a good explanation deserves attention from the very people whose behavior it is about—the informants: getting feedback from them."

What a struggle to be sure one has an accurate description that could be generalized. The finding is doubted from the start to the end. No average researcher could begin to test his findings with such a long list. Credibility of findings is lost to doubt. Thus why transfer a finding to another unit, why generalize under this cloud of suspicion.

Clearly conceptual categories carefully generated by GT procedures do not have this burden of accuracy, nor testing of it, since they are abstract of time, place and people. For example are the concepts of psuedo-friending or worsening progressions

accurate or not. The question is irrelevant, except for the fact they are grounded concepts nor reified. Reified concepts, that is concepts with no empirical references, are inapplicable, thus inaccurate in this manner.

The QDA methodologists, as close as they come, do not have a clue or thought for FGT generalizing. All they do is struggle over descriptive generalizing and use all kinds of tactics to increase the probability of the generalizing for transferability, validity and accuracy. The criteria of credibility or accuracy defeats transferability and validity from the start.

Increasing the volume of data by increasing the representativeness of the data, the size of the unit or the number of units researched, may increase accuracy, but while this is routine doable for quantitative research, it is very difficult for qualitative research. (See David Silverman, *Qualitative Research*, second edition, Sage 2004, p. 295–299) on the doubts of small samples and need to increase the number studies to generalize descriptively.

Qualitative research deals in small numbers and small units relative to quantitative research and therefore appear more particularistic. As a basic goal of science, generalization does not apply to qualitative research's descriptive generalization. (See Lincoln and Guba, op cit, p. 111).

Interestingly enough whether a generalization may be more of less accurate based on the origin of the data from which the generalization is made, may be moot for the researcher doing the study and generalizing. It can be a self fulfilling, self referential process of screening and evaluating the generalization based on the framework used in the research, like it was accurate in the first place. Thus the generalization is based on the generalized framework applied, before hand, to the research so of course one can generalize descriptions. For example if a researcher starts his research on prostitutes with a preconceived framework based on poor self images based on identity theory then he/she will start generalizing about poor self images with his descriptions. Then in fact, who knows if the theory and the findings are accurate and not just self-fulfilling. Often the theory is speculative. The descriptive generalizations that follow from a preconceived theory do not test the theory. They simply continue with support for the preconceived speculation. The conjecture increases non stop until,

if ever, the claims lead to evidentiary and accuracy problems.

The summary of this section is said well by Anssi Peraklya (Silverman, op cit, p. 299) "All serious qualitative research involves assuring the accuracy of recordings and testing of truthfulness of analytic claims." Indeed the only way to get away from this struggle is to turn to conceptual generalization. But realizing this in the face of the squelching by worrisome accuracy of descriptive generalizations is difficult for QDA methodologists.

The Single Case

A lot can be learned from a small single case when generating concepts from it that name latent patterns and the concepts have general implications. This affirmation somewhat answers Anssi Perakyla's question (op cit, p. 295) "How widely can the results, derived from relatively small samples be generalized." The answer is not widely if they are descriptive generalizations and quite extensively if they are GT categories.

Silverman in *Doing Qualitative Research*, (Sage 2000, p. 102), states referring to case studies, "make a lot out of a little." And this means to make it analytically interesting. However he says "nagging doubts remain." This doubt surfaces in a regular refrain heard from student researchers. "I have so few data, only just one case. How can I possibly generalize about it?" Silverman continues by quoting Stake, "Stake refers to the intrinsic case study where the case is of interest in all its particularity and ordinariness. No attempt is made to generalize beyond the single case or even to build theories." Then Silverman quotes Jennifer Mason who says, "Qualitative research should therefore produce explanations which are generalizable in some way or which have a wider resonance (1996). Silverman then concludes with what the reader now knows clearly: it's a struggle. He says: "the problem of representativeness is a perennial worry of many qualitative researchers. Can we generalize from cases to populations without following a purely statistical logic."

Silverman concludes with four possible solutions to "obtain generalizability: 1. combining qualitative research with quantitative measures of populations, 2. purposive sampling guided by time and resources, 3. theoretical sampling, and 4. using an analytic model which assumes that generalizability is present in the existence of any case." (p. 103) All these solutions focus on obtaining accuracy to the best of one's ability and all are

beyond the resources typically of the lone qualitative researcher in the field, just collecting data.

Using qualitative with quantitative data is hard unless the quantitative literature — article — backs up a qualitative finding. We have touched on research guided by preframing analytic models as being self-fulfilling, unless the model comes from a GT. Purposive sampling and theoretical sampling will work, as we will see in Chapter 5, if the researcher does sampling for conceptualization not description. Silverman is still on the descriptive level trying to achieve accuracy to justify transferability and validity. But he is very close to doing FGT, if he would only turn to constant conceptual comparison and drop seeking similarities, differences and negative cases to achieve descriptive generalizations. But alas, not so. He says: "The comparative approach directly tackles the question of generalizability by demonstrating similarities and differences across a number of settings" (Perhyl, 1997, p. 214) "In this sense the literature review has as much to do with the issue of generalizability as with displaying academic credentials." The reader would enjoy his chapter. Clearly single case studies put an excessive strain on descriptive generalization.

We are at the point in this chapter where the ideas offered and the literature covered are fairly conclusive in resulting in the struggle for making descriptive generalizations. Now I wish to turn to my section on single case generality in *The GT Perspective I*, Sociology Press 2001, pp. 96–98).

Case Generality

In seems like a conflict of intent but case studies are conceptually generalizable in many ways. A case study is a study of a specific case, in depth, intensely and descriptively. It is specific, special, unique, yet relevant. Relevance itself implies general significance. The latent patterns within the case, as revealed descriptively, are used as a basis for generalizing conceptually. For example our case study of a patient dying of cancer in hospital brought out many of the general problems of dying in hospital. For example the properties of lingering status passages. (See *Anguish*, Strauss and Glaser, Sociology Press, 1970)

From a FT conceptual point of view, the pressure to generalize aspects of this case was great, WHETHER OR NOT it

was a typical case or an atypical case, if the generalizing is conceptual. If the generalizing is descriptive, we have the struggle showing similarity between units or if atypical, the contrast.

If the generalizing is conceptual, the privacy and confidence of the case and the people therein is maintained because the conceptualization is abstract of time, place and people. The source remains anonymous. If the generalizing is descriptive, confidence is easily broken, even violated, and most importantly so for well known cases preferring anonymity. GT conceptualization detaches itself from the intensely specific descriptions.

Often case studies are done because there is a special issue involved within the case, such as organizationally produced error, a violation of a normative social process, or an untoward travel disaster because of lack of cautionary control, etc. Yet the very issue and its structural production, has great general implication for what to do in other similar cases. The issue, descriptively, will often be distorted descriptively, by multiple realities, impressions, confusion and by impermeable complexities and changes over time, etc. Again descriptive generality is poor because of inaccuracies in data description. If GT is used to generalize conceptually using constant comparison, the inaccuracies become the data and are conceptualized as part of the issue and are easily generalizable. A theory explaining aspects of concern about the issue is generated. The issue becomes an area of interest, as we say in GT.

A descriptive case study tells the whole story. This is totally unnecessary in GT research, given its delimiting procedures yielding a theory about a concept. But the GT researcher can start with the details of an existing case and constantly compare, generate a core category and their properties on the issue and start a substantive theory about its resolution which has general implications, hence could be taken to a FGT level. The case study and perhaps other cases can be theoretically sampled. The other comparable cases may be only knowledge fragments, but that is all the data that is necessary for theoretical sampling on a category. Again the uniqueness of the case study is lost in its general implications by a GT approach to it.

This is a form of secondary analysis; that is the researcher uses ongoing research on a case as data, while bringing in other

data from extant case studies for generating a substantive theory. A lot is learned from the case as a result of the secondary analysis. The case study is no longer a concentrated bounded inquiry with a focused description. It starts a conceptualized GT. It becomes both a unique, intrinsically interesting research problem and a start of a substantive theory based on the latent patterns in the case study data, which with theoretically sampled secondary data bring out the main concern of the participants and its constant resolving by a core category. The complexity of the description which may be hard to grasp or relate to other data, becomes organized conceptually and related easily by the GT which provides conceptual handles.

The case's latent patterns become abstracted and generalized using secondary analysis and theoretical sampling. The smallest aspect of the case study can lead to a main concern with great relevance. The unit orientation of the case study with struggle for descriptive generalization to other units changes to a conceptual generalization that can be applied wherever with emergent fit.

For example the study of one adolescent's transition to college can begin to yield a substantive GT theory on the haphazard status passage from high school to college of working class children. (see Toni A William Sanchez, PhD dissertation, 1998). Or, the study of one non-political social movement such as female domestics seeking health care benefits, can lead to generating a GT on non-political social movements.

If a case study is actually one of a class of cases studied, it makes the secondary analysis easier with more varied data. Studying a class of cases — many cases — may appear to yield better empirical generalization because of the survey effect. Yet it is still a struggle to generalize descriptions to other units. A GT generated from relevant categories emergent in the case will always work better.

In summary, the purpose of the case study is not to represent the world, but to represent the case. However, the utility of case study research to practitioners and policy makers is in its extension of experience: to wit its conceptual generalization. Ultimately, the case study researcher is interested in a conceptual process for a population of cases, not the individual case. Thus GT secondary analysis leads effective particularization

of a case to valuing conceptual generalization with confidence. The value of a case study is thusly achieved in great measure by a grounded theory approach to it.

Now I would like to summarize as a wrap up of this chapter by quoting a section in the *Grounded Theory Perspective I*, (Sociology Press, 2001, p. 90–94). I beg the reader's forgiveness for the redundancy, but the points are so significant for doing FGT that a little repetition is in order. This section will make a good quote for those researchers who are trying to put forward a FGT for career and colleague purpose, as well as for a contribution. If the reader is total confident in knowing what was said above, this section can be skipped.

Conceptual Contrasted with Descriptive Generalizing

In contrast QDA generalizing differs from GT generalizing substantially, because the former is on a descriptive level and the latter on a conceptual level. QDA generalizing of description is often very difficult and based on assumptions that do not hold. The problem is does a set of findings that hold in one unit, hold in another unit, whether the unit is at the same level or a larger unit. Sufficient commonality dimensions must be ascertained between the units to apply or generalize the findings in one to the other. This is a stretch that is difficult, and even if done, is short lived as the contexts are always changing. For example, does a finding in one nursing school apply to another or in all nursing schools? Particularism impacts at every point.

Generalizing a finding from one unit to another is often done by a subsequent researcher using random sampling to achieve commonalities. It can also be done by replication and testing to a modest degree. This is expensive in time and money, making GT conceptual generalizing faster and more economical. GT can generalize faster and better through conceptual constant comparisons, thus raising the level of generality of the descriptions of both units. Given the short life of description and whatever the qualitative method used, the problem remains of keeping accuracy accurate long enough to generalize descriptively for more time than the short run.

As we have seen above, the problem for description generalization is how PROPERLY to get the descriptions to a generalizing level, SINCE it is so natural to bust the limits of a

description and see it generally anyway. Using random sampling in another larger unit or roughly equal units, feels good, since piling up units feels general even if the required commonalities are not there. The analysis of commonalities easily becomes conditionally contorted. Using negative or deviant cases or similar dimensions of another unit is standard and works to some degree in the struggle. Selective, bias reanalysis of the case enters to iron out relevant non-commonalities.

Some will combine a qualitative research with a quantitative survey of a larger population that touched on the same finding to indicate how it may be general. The researcher will be lucky to find this backup. He must search the quantitative literature extensively to find such support of generality.

The use of an analytic theory model which assumes that generalizability is present in a particular description is also used. Of course, this easily can compound the lack of grounding if the theory model is speculative. For example one can use traditional self-image identity, role theory, reference group theory to generalize a finding. We find in GT that this is a deductive, conceptual elaboration which is usually dangerously irrelevant, does not fit and only works in the fertile mind of the author. GT researchers love to bust these erudite, speculative myths.

Statistical descriptions accomplish a probability generalizing, but of course, qualitative data lacks statistics. A QDA researcher can by piling up descriptions — use volume — use probability statements that the description is general, but where they get the qualitative statistics who knows. Usually the need comes from a wish to increase the relevancy of "tiny topic" research by an "ought" deduction.

"Tiny topic" research in QDA comes from a preference to study people's manifest problem rather than a conceptual, latent problem. This can lead to generalizing more with empathy for the manifest problem, yet with little abstraction. The descriptive patterns are reduced to a description of one tiny topic, for example: "Lived Experience in Early Stage Dementia," (*Qualitative Health Research*, April 2004, p. 453). Generalizing to another unit is a struggle at best, but easily ignored for the specific problem concern. GT generalizing stays on a conceptual level of analysis and is applied to similar structural units with ease.

"Tiny topic" research also focuses on routine but pressing problems in the medical, nursing, educational and business fields. It is sometimes very hard to look beyond the problem description to the more general, conceptual implications, because it is so important. It is hard to think theoretically, when the data is so significant. For example it was hard for Hans Thulesius to go from studying palliative cancer care to the abstraction of balancing care.

Another QDA researcher says, in the struggle to generalize a tiny topic, "As the numbers of cases is increased, so does the scope of the generalizability." An example of such descriptive research is that of demonstrating the comforting role of the trauma nurse when the patient is conscious. This descriptor will enable comfort talk to be taught and eventually formally integrated as a part of the responsibility of trauma nursing. The description becomes conceptual and then becomes general to all trauma situations of any sort. Thus GT's ability to generalize easily gets used by QDA researchers without them really knowing it, in spite of their cautionary statements such as about "limited causal implications." GT concepts have such grab they break through description capture, the pressure to generalize is so great.

Janice Morse reflects on this pressure and struggle to generalize QDA and its not great success. "In explanatory theory, concepts and linkages are identified and described. These theoretical ideas are complex and important. However, few have been developed from qualitative research because of the limitation inherent in qualitative method in sample size, and the context bound nature of qualitative inquiry." She suggests "using two or more qualitative studies" simultaneously so that qualitative findings can be broadened and inform quantitative research. Once again the piling up of researched units is used to raise the level of abstraction. She says: "It is the level of abstraction reached, the quality of the interpretation and the use of concepts and principals of abstraction that make the theory generalizable." Her struggle to generalize description gets so close to conceptual generalization, but never quite reaches it because of descriptive capture. Her journal "Qualitative Health Research" more and more has become a journal of tiny topic research as her dictum for theory generation has been ignored, forgotten or just plain hopeless for so many researchers.

Others struggle with the pressure to generalize while unawaredly in conflict with the simple properties of QDA description. Listen to Howard Becker, a well known QDA researcher: "Sampling is a major problem for any kind of research. We cannot study every case of whatever we are interested in, nor should we want to. Every scientific enterprise tries to find out something that will apply to everything of a certain kind by studying a few examples, the results of the study being, as we say, 'generalizable' to all members of that class of stuff. We need the sample to persuade people that we know something about the whole class." (Becker, "Tricks of the Trade" 1998, p. 67) Here we see the same generalizing model referred to many, many times in this chapter. Many cases and random representation of one case making it typical of larger cases. Both are too difficult in QDA, not realistic, and so simple persuasion is necessary.

Alasuutari suggests another type of struggle: change words! She says: "Perhaps 'generalizability' is the wrong word to describe what we attempt to achieve in qualitative research. Generalization is a word that should be reserved for surveys only. What can be analyzed instead is how the researcher demonstrates that the analysis relates to things beyond the material at hand … extrapolation better captures the typical procedures in qualitative research" (1995, p.156–157). The spin and struggle continues.

In all these solutions the QDA generalizing problem remains a struggle which solutions are never quite believable. Pressure to generalize makes the wish fulfillment "so", but data and strategy doubts have an easy time in making it not "so". It is clear that generalizing to a population or a unit is very hard, and often very attackable by those who do not want it applied to them or by them.

The descriptive capture struggle is moot for GT which easily generalizes a conceptualization of a range, typology, process, tolerance limits or any core category. GT procedures can help a QDA description get generalized by doing some theoretical sampling and constant conceptual comparison. It raises the level of description to the abstract general level of conceptualization.

For example a good QDA on stock broker selling of international securities was easily conceptualized as using "story

selling". Nonrelevant stories told by the client made him feel comfortable and trusting, whether or not the story was a sharable or unique experience. Thus the client was disposed to buying. Story selling and its compadre story talk is used by all of us to gain comfort, trust and sharing with others. A description was raised to a conceptual level with general implications.

Clearly GT conceptual generalizing applied with ease and emergent fit by constant comparison is the powerful way to go. Description generalization from unit to unit leaves too much to struggle and subsequent doubts.

In sum, let the QDA methodologists continue the perennial struggle to find solutions to descriptively generalize. There is no real, lasting solution for them. It is their problem. I wish them the best. In this book we focus on conceptual generalization which occurs with ease, is seen everywhere and is applicable with emergent fit, when doing FGT. We now turn to procedures for generating a FGT.