Chapter 9
Generality and Particularity of Knowledge

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SUMMARY
Psychological research is normally judged by its success in producing general knowledge, but qualitative studies have a hard time living up to the conception of the generality of knowledge which dominates psychology. In order to defend themselves better in the knowledge wars in psychology, and to fulfill their potential in the production of knowledge, I argue that qualitative studies need to promote a different conception of generality than the one which dominates psychology. Qualitative studies must also argue that they may produce a different kind of knowledge and show which conception of generality and role for generality this knowledge involves. This chapter is therefore about knowledge and not about methods per se. It is written against the background of my empirical research, which is based on critical psychology and social practice theory. It is therefore also concerned with how a conception of generality can be an integrated part of a situated approach to the study of persons in social practice. Finally, I argue that introducing the uses and users of research in our conception of research raises important issues about knowledge and generalisation.

INTRODUCTION
In this chapter I call for critical reflection on two fronts. First, critical qualitative research in psychology is inhibited by the power of the mainstream conception of knowledge and generalisation. We cannot defend the significance of our outcomes and argue convincingly for it by adopting the mainstream conception of knowledge and generalisation. Nor can we argue effectively against the limitations of mainstream research. Second, we must stop neglecting the uses and users of research in conceptions of research and realise that bringing them into the picture reopens important issues about the nature of knowledge and generalisation.

KNOWLEDGE IN MAINSTREAM PSYCHOLOGY
Mainstream psychology has always insisted that the proper scientific study of psychological phenomena should be carried out in especially arranged experimental situations which are isolated from the ongoing social practice of the experimenter and the experimental subjects alike. Only a few features which are abstracted from these situations — the independent and dependent variables — are allowed to be taken into account. This ‘standard arrangement’ of psychological research (Holzkamp, 1996) has deep implications for the form of knowledge constructed in psychology. With the methods of this arrangement, classes of isolated variables are studied while particular
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personal and contextual features and links are bracketed. The resulting knowledge is impersonal and decontextualised — it is about links between classes of variables rather than about persons in particular contexts. A general finding from this arrangement is an isolated generality which identifies general links and mechanisms in the formula: ‘always when x then y’. The generality of this knowledge makes claims to the frequency and distribution of isolated variables, mechanisms and events (Holzkamp, 1994). Since knowledge thus obtained is claimed to hold ‘always when x then y’, it is fixed and immutable. The causal mechanisms between variables are consequently claimed to be unaffected by changes in other respects. Even when particular variables or mechanisms are claimed to cause changes, they are claimed to remain unaffected by the very changes they provoke, as, for instance, personality traits by the personal development they are held to predict.

The isolation of the experimental situation brackets the links between immediate stimuli and the social mediation of immediate situations. This leads to a form of knowledge which is ‘immediacy fixated’ (Holzkamp, 1983). It entails a thinning out of the presence of the world in notions of psychological phenomena and a neglect of its significance for psychological functioning. The subject matter of psychology thus loses much of its grounding in the world and comes to appear quite ‘unworldly’ (Holzkamp, 1996). In the process, the links between psychological phenomena and the historical structures of the world are lost. Moreover, this psychological knowledge depicts human subjectivity as it appears under conditions controlled by others — the experimenter — that is, as a ‘science of control’ psychology interprets subjectivity from the third person standpoint of the expert (Holzkamp, 1983).

Put back into social practice this impersonal, decontextualised knowledge appears in the guise of abstract categories. Dorothy Smith (1990) calls it ‘extralocal’ knowledge supported by the powers of the institutional epistemology and standpoint of science. It appears as reified expressions of subjects’ own powers, and subjects are subsumed under an abstract knowledge which incorporates their powers in an alienated way. In the social relations between scholars, professional practitioners, and just plain folks (Lave, 1988), scholars represent this class of general knowledge. They incorporate it through a process of higher education in which they elevate themselves above the particularities of mundane practices and come to stand for ‘the general’ while just plain folks and, in part, professional practitioners remain embedded in the particular concerns of mundane life.

QUANDARIES ABOUT KNOWLEDGE IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research does not fare well with this conception of knowledge and generalisation. It makes the outcomes of qualitative studies appear vague and inconclusive — regardless of how enlightening and important they may be. The Frankfurt school philosopher Karl-Otto Apel (1973) likens the knowledge proposed by qualitative studies to ‘a cup of coffee theory of understanding’, meaning that once these invigorating inputs are digested, scientists may get down to the real business of producing genuine knowledge. In reaction against the mainstream conception of general knowledge, some have construed a dichotomy between universal knowledge and knowledge about particulars, and declared that a cultural psychology should limit itself to the latter. A prominent example is Bruner (1990; followed by Benson, 2001). However, in this reaction they leave the mainstream conception of general knowledge
untouched and take it over as one pole in their dichotomy. In the eyes of the mainstream they now stand as producers of trivialities, that is, of non-generalisable particularities. However, even in qualitative studies of particular practices we cannot but refer to generalities. Experimental studies are also studies of particular practices from which experimentalists generalise according to their procedures. The problem rather is that qualitative researchers need to clarify that they work with another kind of knowledge and another conception of generalisation which fits the research they do. Only then will they be able to write up stronger conclusions to their qualitative studies.

While mainstream knowledge is about fixed links between isolated variables which make up abstract categories and mechanisms, knowledge in qualitative research is about how things hang together in social practice (Dreier, in press; Shatzki, 1996, 2002). Insisting on characterising things in isolation is replaced by insisting on characterising the hanging-togetherness of things in social practice. This knowledge leads to insight into the dynamic — contradictory — hanging togetherness of social practice and in social practice (Holzkamp, 1988). Insisting on the concrete hanging togetherness of things does not imply studying everything every time, that is, studying totalities of infinite proportions. It means understanding things by considering them as linked in a pertinent nexus of social practice, that is, the particular hanging togetherness of a particular situation and practice and the relevant hanging togetherness for comprehending the issue of the present study. Moreover, outcomes of such studies do not only consist in the generalities that may be identified. Identifying only generalities would restrict and impoverish what we might learn from such studies. The empirical outcomes of qualitative studies hold many dimensions of which only some are general. Qualitative researchers face the challenge of accounting for the complexity and wealth of their outcomes in a clearly defined way. In doing so, they must make an end to the contempt for description and particulars characteristic of mainstream research. What is more, whether findings about human activity in social practice hold, and whether they are general or not, depends on human activity in social practice. The truth of such findings is a matter of practice. Outcomes of qualitative studies are therefore not fixed and completed results but open-ended phenomena, activities, relations and practices which cannot be given a finite and complete definition.

All the same, qualitative research must insist that there are not only particulars in concrete situations and practices. Making an end to seeing generalities as isolated entities, we must insist that they are variably linked to particular situations and gain peculiar qualities and significances from being so. We must take back into particular situations and hanging togetherness what was abstracted from any situation and hanging togetherness. For example, anxiety holds distinctive general qualities and significances which have to do with losing one’s grip over one’s situation (Holzkamp, 1983). Knowing such general features is helpful in guiding the understanding of concrete anxieties. But concrete anxieties also hold particular personal and contextual qualities and significances, such as when the meaning of, and coping with, anxieties for a girl in school centres on being excluded from the company of friends and ridiculed by them, while at home it centres on her parents showing consideration for her and helping her out. Personal anxieties hold general qualities of anxiety in particular, personal and contextual ways (Dreier, in press). Put in general terms: general features are variably linked to particular situations and the ‘hanging togetherness’ of personal social practice.
DIALECTICAL RESOURCES

This is dialectics. Lenin summarises it as follows in his notes on reading Hegel:

Let us begin with the most simple, the most ordinary, the most widespread, and so forth, with an arbitrary statement: the leaves on the tree are green; Iwan is a human being; Shutschka is a dog, and the like. Already here is (as Hegel brilliantly noticed) dialectics: the singular is general… Hence the opposites (the singular is contrary to the general) are identical: the singular only exists in the connection that leads to the general. The general only exists in the singular, by virtue of the singular. Every singular is (in one way or the other) general. Every general is (a part or an aspect or the essence of) the singular. Every general only approximately includes all singular objects. Every singular is incompletely incorporated in the general, and so forth. Every singular is connected with another kind of singular (things, phenomena, processes) through thousands of transitions, and so forth. (Lenin, 1971, p. 340; my translation)

According to a dialectical understanding, general features are present in varying ways with varying meanings and varying links to varying other features in the present hanging togetherness. This has many implications for how we may comprehend the analytic nature of research.

First, to consider the variability and flexibility that dialectics argues for is different from attempting to rescue mainstream knowledge from the vagueness of its universal generalities by introducing more specific generalities. Thus, some cognitive psychologists (e.g., Gigerenzer, 2000) and personality psychologists (e.g., Bandura, 1999; Mischel & Shoda, 1999) argue for more specific generalities, attuned to specific types of situations or domains as specific cognitive strategies or behaviour patterns. They claim that cognition and behaviour are uniform, and thus general, within a specific type of situation while they are different across diverse types of situations. Such approaches are concerned with the specificity of domains and situations, but not with the situated variability of concrete social practices and human activities.

Second, in their conclusions qualitative researchers should not just sum up what they claim to be general in their findings. Rather, they should sum up their comprehension of the concrete hanging togetherness of the practice they studied with its general and particular features in a peculiar nexus with associated particular meanings. If they restrict themselves to accounting for general features only, the outcomes of qualitative studies will appear unnecessarily weak and inconclusive.

Third, the knowledge that qualitative researchers produce contributes to comprehending a nexus irrespective of how general precisely this nexus is.

Fourth, we must distinguish between the general relations between concepts in a theory and the particular links and qualities of what those concepts refer to in particular, concrete practices. Therefore, a theory cannot be superimposed directly on the concrete subject-matter of a study. It does not even tell us precisely which links, qualities and dynamics are characteristic of the present nexus. It too must be used dialectically to allow us to grasp particular, new links, qualities, and nexus.

Fifth, any empirical study — be it experimental or non-experimental — addresses particular exemplars of a practice with a peculiar configuration of general and particular arrangements, links, and aspects. So, all research materials are necessarily particular ones, indexical, contingent in time and place, but we may learn about the concrete...
practice we study by comparing it with other similar practices. In analysing it, we necessarily refer beyond it to other, similar, and different situations and practices. Other exemplars are rarely identical with the one we study but similar to and different from it. We learn about the practice we study by considering these similarities as well as differences. Indeed, similarities and differences normally co-exist in the complex hanging togetherness of changing and varying practices. This point of view is closely related to Wittgenstein’s critique of the assumption of identity in our understanding of concepts and exemplars, and his argument for the co-existence of similarities and differences of heterogeneous elements displaying family resemblances (Medina, 2003; Wittgenstein, 1953).

Sixth, mostly we study practices which undergo changes. Social practice is dynamic. Its links and aspects vary and change. Sometimes it is even our task to contribute to such variations and changes, perhaps not directly as scholars but indirectly through the work of professional practitioners. So, our research should reflect the re-production and change of the hanging togetherness of social practices. But when practices change, some aspects and links lose significance while others become more important, and some aspects and links arise, change, and replace earlier ones. Couched in the jargon of variables: which variables we should consider and the significance of those variables change too (Abbott, 2001). The concrete place, significance, and quality of general aspects also change. Research on changing practices hence necessarily leads to a knowledge which is incomplete and open-ended.

**GENERALISATION OF PRACTICE IN PRACTICE**

In critical psychology Holzkamp (1983) proposes viewing generalisation ultimately as a generalisation of practice in practice. By this he means that (a) the socially produced means and resources are made generally available to everybody in practice, (b) it is made generally possible for everybody to develop abilities, and to use these means and resources as their means of living in practice, (c) everybody’s abilities are thereby generalised in practice, and (d) all this leads to a generalisation of practice in practice. This insistence upon generalisation of practice in practice also opens a new front in discussing issues of generalisation in research. We may now distinguish between a merely analytic generalisation of an idea or a claim in research and a practical generalisation of practice in practice where this idea or claim becomes generally available and usable. We may also hold that the practical generalisation ultimately decides the fate of the analytic generalisation which, until then, remains hypothetical, that is, virtual, potential. Behind these arguments lurks the issue of the significance of the uses and users of research in conceptions of research. To put it differently: these arguments raise the issue about the relation between the production and uses of research outcomes. In fact, the dimensions of use explode and relativise what is written about the generalisation of the outcomes of research in the literature on research methods. Here users are positioned almost beyond the horizon of scientific practice while the significance of the outcomes of scientific work is fixed at the point of the written account — and not of its uses elsewhere and later. Researchers are busy documenting and competing over analytic generalisations — in abstraction from their uses and users. They are holding on to an inadequate model of the social practice of research with an uneasy feeling that their work is not really used as intended, as hoped, or as it should be.
THE PRODUCTION AND USES OF KNOWLEDGE

The following, by and large implicit, conception of the relation between the production and uses of results dominates mainstream research. Its generalisations are considered to be directly transferable and applicable results which hold and can be implemented identically by diverse participants in other contexts. General findings are seen as useful precisely by virtue of their generality while particulars are seen as of limited use. However, if this conception is to work in practice, the world must consist of a set of identical elements, situations, and practices. The direct application of such general findings is, strictly speaking, of no use in different situations with other scopes and practices — unless, of course, these differences can be neutralised and bracketed. Implicit in the mainstream conception of the application of general research findings is also an assumption about their uses as a compliant application of precisely what the researchers believe to be right. This amounts to a docile following and getting it right or wrong which we are all taught to adhere to in school. It is a notion of use as normalisation in which general knowledge should be applied correctly and in no other way. Lave’s (1988) studies of math skills in everyday practices and other similar studies have shaken this belief which leaves no room for situated configurations of practices and abilities. Indeed, the idea of direct application presupposes an immutable knowledge maintaining its generality unaffected by the contexts and structures of social practice in which it is presented. In sum, the mainstream conception boils down to that an abstraction of the outcome of research is to be copied and repeated elsewhere and later.

But if we study the uses of knowledge — as I have done in relation to therapy and education (e.g., Dreier, 2003; 2005; in press) — quite a different picture emerges. Put in general terms: to hold as outcomes about practice, these outcomes must be re-produced in practice. A study or an intervention only works in practice if people pick it up accordingly elsewhere and later. Whether outcomes hold or not depends on human activity, practice. But mostly, instead of one general use, there are many different uses by different parties in different situations depending on local scopes, understandings, concerns, and co-participants. Uses are particular and selective ones. The uses of outcomes must also often be pursued through chains of action across diverse contexts, in between many other pursuits, and linked into what else goes on. Generalised outcomes may thereby gain many particular impacts. Outcomes which researchers assess to be merely particulars may even be picked up and generalised in practice by users. It is, in fact, less obvious than in the research literature that generalisation is the name of the game in the uses of research findings. Uses are particular and selective regardless of whether findings are general or not. If findings are not forgotten and thus certainly not generalised, they are re-interpreted, re-negotiated, modified, and changed by users elsewhere and later. People only stop doing so when they stop attending to them, and the findings then most certainly will not be generalised. Indeed, researchers as well as professional practitioners and just plain folks alike use research outcomes selectively and interpretatively. Conflicts over their uses also often abound. Besides, users face competing proposals for generalities from different scholars and studies — which then, of course, cannot all be general. These competing studies suggest different activities to users, and different parties in different places use the outcomes of a particular study differently. In fact, users do not only learn from research by becoming convinced to adhere to its outcomes as proposed. Human beings learn from differences, and what they learn from an outcome may be to do it differently from what is proposed so that it may fit their situation, understanding, and concerns. They may come to adopt a stance relative to a research finding not to do as it proposes. Indeed, they may use it as a guide
for what they do not want to do, to become, to believe, and in searching for what they rather want instead. They compare outcomes with their own situations, understandings, and concerns, and they come to their own understandings and draw their own conclusions.

It should be clear by now that we must distinguish between a researcher-centred notion of application of research and a user-centred notion of uses of research. Even the critical-psychological notion of generalisation of outcomes in practice holds a certain researcher-centeredness which relies on the gathering of a homogenous, politically motivated population as potential beneficiaries of scientific contributions. We need to pay much closer attention to the problems in the social relations between scientific experts, professional practitioners, and just plain folks if we do not want generalisation to amount to a mere privileging of the researcher’s voice over others in a contested social practice, or even a vain hope of instantiating a researcher monopoly of interpretation. Indeed, in practice we cannot entirely separate the production and use of knowledge — neither in the research process or afterwards. That is, we cannot draw a tight boundary between research practice and use. Much research rests on the interplay between the use and production of knowledge throughout the course of the research project. The relation between production and use of knowledge is no simple before or after, inside or outside. Production and use are variously linked all along by various parties in various contexts. The craft of research is not isolated and cannot be understood and regulated methodically in isolation. Indeed, the practical seclusion and control of the research situation is a condition for the externalisation of production and use. In fact, when we combine a mainstream belief in general knowledge with the externalisation of situations of use from the production of knowledge, we get the knowledge-transmit-internalise-apply model which Lave (1997) and Dreier (2003) criticise. The model depends on a particular structural relation between the production and use of knowledge, between experts and just plain folks in structures of social practice.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has dealt with issues relating to the basic conception of knowledge in psychology. I argued that qualitative research in psychology needs to spell out its potential for contributing to a different type of basic knowledge than the one that dominates mainstream psychology. This also involves clarifying the different status and role of generalisation for which dialectics provides important resources. I then introduced the distinction between analytic generalisation and generalisation of practice in practice. This led me to point out (a) the neglect of the uses and users of research in the dominating conception of knowledge and generalisation in research, and (b) the socio-practical nature of knowledge and generalisation.

REFERENCES


