

Communicative generalisation: Dialogical means of advancing knowledge through a case study of an ‘unprecedented’ disaster

Culture & Psychology
0(0) 1–18

© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1354067X19894930

journals.sagepub.com/home/cap**Flora Cornish** Department of Methodology, London School of Economics
and Political Science, London, UK

Abstract

In the interest of learning from a unique and devastating disaster, this paper develops a conceptualisation of generalisation as a communicative process. Growing from the author’s experience of conducting and communicating an ethnographic case study of the community response to the Grenfell Tower disaster, a tower block fire which traumatised a West London community, and has been widely labelled an ‘unprecedented’ event, the paper considers ways of developing knowledge with wider application from this unique case. ‘Communicative generalisation’ is concerned with the significance of knowledge to epistemic communities rather than abstract universal truth. Four modes of communicative generalisation are explored. By elaborating the multiperspectival nature of a case and its relation to its context, case studies may enrich readers’ *generalised other*. Case studies may address an epistemic community by *problematising* a taken-for-granted situation or theory. A case study can extend the situations to which it may transfer by *multiplying its audiences*, and thus forcing its authors to take multiple perspectives. It can also extend its meaningfulness by *multiplying speakers*, facilitating expressions of diverse perspectives on the case. ‘Communicative generalisation’ distributes the agency of generalisation among authors, cases and audiences. This redistribution has implications for the politics and temporality of generalisation.

Corresponding author:

Flora Cornish, Department of Methodology, London School of Economics and Political Science, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: f.cornish@lse.ac.uk

Keywords

Case study, generalisation, dialogism, generalised other, addressivity, authorship, knowledge exchange, disaster

Introduction

In the early hours of 14 June 2017, the worst domestic fire in Britain since the Second World War consumed Grenfell Tower, a block of flats owned by the local authority, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Two hundred and twenty-seven people escaped the blaze. Thousands of neighbours witnessed horrifying scenes. Seventy-two people died, although the details emerged only slowly. Local churches and community centres opened their doors to survivors and distressed local residents, offering shelter, information where they had it, and emotional support. As the details flashed around the world's news, crowds of people and hundreds of tonnes of donations flooded the area. It was widely agreed by local residents and national government that the local authority was failing to lead the response properly, and various supportive and replacement organisations were sent in.

Most directly affected were those who were bereaved or lost their homes in the most traumatic of circumstances. Individually and collectively, bereaved relatives and survivors initiated an arduous journey of recovery ranging from intensely personal matters to national fire safety campaigns. My research engagement, however, has focused on the response of the broader local community, not necessarily defined by the formal disaster responders as bereaved or survivors, but who have also been deeply affected, and mobilised a massive supportive response.

Local residents had questions about the safety of their own homes, the dangers in the air they were breathing, the traumatisation of their children and themselves, the treatment of their neighbours who had escaped the Tower, particularly their rehousing, and the viability of the elected council and its officers. They raised these questions loudly at public meetings with the authorities, in internal community meetings and in their one-to-one meetings with service providers and politicians. For many intense months, relations between local residents and the authorities in charge of delivering the response and eventually the recovery (in emergency management language) were extremely highly charged, characterised by a deep distrust on the part of local residents, and by fear, absence of leadership and inaction on the part of the local authority. Residents were, and still are, in the extraordinary position that they have to rely for the safety of their housing, the provision of crucial public services and the 'recovery' of the community, on an utterly discredited local council which is under police investigation for corporate manslaughter of their neighbours.

Having informed myself about the devastation, the outpouring of spontaneous support, the outrage and calls for accountability, as a concerned citizen, two weeks after the fire, I first visited the area to pay my respects, in solidarity, and to try to

make sense of a complex and significant situation. Although I had limited experience of sudden disaster, or of the North Kensington community, I recognised the creativity and commitment of a grounded local response to a crisis, and the anger of a community facing existential threat and a delegitimated government authority, from my work with sex workers facing the public health crisis of HIV in India (e.g. Cornish, Shukla, & Banerji, 2010). I was also thinking through community–authority dynamics of distrust, de-legitimation, silencing/listening and calls for accountability after disaster through the work of my PhD student, Nimesh Dhungana, on accountability in the aftermath of Nepal’s 2015 earthquake (Dhungana, 2019; Dhungana & Cornish, in press), and my own efforts to learn about how community activism produces social change (Cornish, Campbell, & Montenegro, 2018; Cornish, Montenegro, van Reisen, Zaka, & Sevitt, 2014). In Tracy’s (2010) terms, there was a ‘resonance’ with my former experience.

In my early engagements with North Kensington community workers and leaders, we jointly made sense of highly antagonistic, emotionally intense and complex events, of how they unfolded and why. I took part in sense-making conversations under chaotic and bewildering, fast-changing conditions, which were unprecedented for many of the community and official responders (though less so for seasoned community campaigners and disaster experts). What I had learned in previous work helped me to make sense of this unique situation (to generalise my past experience to this new case), and to do so in ways that also made sense to others. By November 2017, five months later, I had submitted a Research Ethics review form and had a knowledge exchange and research project underway examining the relation between community and official responses to the disaster. My research engagement with this case thus resulted from my interaction with the field. It did not come from the deductive selection of a case chosen for theoretical reasons. Existing knowledge and frameworks with which I was familiar seemed to *answer to* problems and tensions thrown up by the field. Two sets of theoretical intuitions informed my research engagement with the case.

The first was that the contentious aftermath of the fire could be understood through the lens of social psychological themata of trust/distrust and stability/change, which I recognised from my and others’ earlier community psychology research (Cornish & Campbell, 2009; Marková & Gillespie, 2007). From reading the news as a citizen, I had a hunch that I had some intellectual tools (theories and methods) to help analyse the mobilisation of community networks, the communicative dynamics, the distrust and sense of disorder that arose. For example, I witnessed pathologising interpretations from powerful figures (e.g. that criticisms of the Council are made by ‘shouty people’, or that campaigners are simply irrationally oppositional (O’Hagan, 2018)). I witnessed dynamics of distrust and blame (e.g. accusations of community leaders colluding with authorities rather than standing up to them; distrust of new-found volunteers who were being recognised clumsily by officials). Given my community psychological training, which always emphasises that people need to be understood in their context, I found myself doing things like problematising categorisations of people as ‘angry’ or

‘shouty’, and explaining behaviour labelled ‘irrational’ with reference to history and context and unfolding interactions. It seemed to me that some of the painful flaws in the process (e.g. controversies over the distribution of resources) were not necessary and could have been avoided, and I hoped that by documenting and understanding the process, something might be learned for the future development of local council–community relations and for future responses to emergencies in other localities – in other words, we might create knowledge about this disaster that would preferably *not generalise* to other similar settings, but, if acted upon by future disaster and community responders, might instead *prevent* similar situations from arising.

The second intuition was that a crisis triggers unusually externalised and public sense-making and world-making. Dewey said in the context of the Great Depression ‘The intellectual function of trouble is to lead men to think’ (in Weick, 2010, p. 543). Local residents had to cope not only with practical needs, but with making sense of a shattered world. Crucial background assumptions for the continuation of normal, everyday activity were obliterated by the fire and the chaotic aftermath. Assumptions that homes are safe, that regulations are broadly sufficient, that emergency services and authorities are capable of keeping citizens safe and looking after them when things go wrong, or that wrongdoing is punished were assumptions that could no longer be sustained. The role of the authorities and the safety of the community were questioned loudly. Community organisations invented ways of responding to new challenges and problems. My training in the social psychology of knowledge, particularly social representations theory (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Marková, 2007) sensitised me to the community dynamics of sense-making. Local residents were grappling with sense-making, as was I, as a researcher. Perhaps an academic–community knowledge–exchange project would be fruitful.

While bringing these intellectual interests to bear, I worried about instrumentalising or objectifying people and their experiences. This is a deeply traumatised context, with a life-changing significance to many involved. It is also national news. It is also part of some professionals’ career stories. Many residents already feel observed, labelled, judged or exploited. The ethical dimensions of making knowledge about other people demand particular attention. To abstract people’s struggles and triumphs and the complexity of the situation to ‘a case of distrust’ or ‘a case of closing down social change’ seemed inappropriate. I wanted to make space for accounts, informed by the spontaneous bubbling up of sense-making that emerged in response to the crisis, which could do justice to its situatedness, uniqueness, its importance for its own sake, not just as an example of something else.

As well as university-based scholars, of course, there are others who also have interests in systematic investigations. Emergency management professionals (i.e. the people who make plans and organise relief and recovery post-disaster) were interested in learning about how communities respond when the authority is thought to be at fault – in a context where authorities often assume the threat to come from ‘outside’, e.g. terrorism or floods. So, while this case was of course in many ways exceptional, emergency management professionals expected that useful

knowledge could be learnt from it. One of the initial impetuses for the research project came from discussions with a local co-researcher, Cathy Long, about how some of the mistakes could have been avoided. Research participants said to me that they wanted to take part in the research so that something good could come from this terrible event.

Informed by my research and knowledge exchange engagement with this particular case, in this paper, I aim to develop an answer to the question of how we might develop knowledge with wider reference (generalisability) from a specific case, informed by dialogical theory – so that some useful knowledge might come from this terrible and ‘unprecedented’ event. Specifically, I propose to think about the question of generalisation as a *communicative* challenge: not as a product of the characteristics of empirical settings (one ‘sending’ context in which data has been gathered; one ‘receiving’ context to which we try to generalise), but as a communication between speakers and audiences, authors and readers. I formulate these ideas at a middle stage of the knowledge cycle, having designed and conducted data collection and some of the analysis, forging interpretations in dialogue with data and local colleagues, but not having formulated eventual ‘lessons’ or conclusions, and not being in a position yet to assess the success of our efforts at communicative generalisation.

Generalisation, abstraction and particularisation

The term ‘generalisation’ and its theorisation originate in quantitative survey and experimental research traditions, responding to a concern that the findings of a study should enable inferences about something beyond the particular data gathered in the study itself – generalising from a sample to a population, or generalising a finding from the constrained experimental setting to ‘real world’ conditions outside the lab (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000).

Much of the case studies literature adopts the language of representativeness, giving central emphasis to ‘case selection’ (which plays an analogous role to sampling) as a basis for making a claim of generalisability. A case is selected because it represents a broader category of things or processes (sometimes with claims that the selection was unbiased). The common claims made for a case are that it is representative, anomalous, crucial, most-different or most-similar (Gerring & Cojocaru, 2016). The case might be claimed to be a ‘typical school’ or a ‘region with exceptional health outcomes’. Or sometimes two cases representing ‘extreme’ ends of a spectrum or ‘diverse’ instances might be compared. In the political science (e.g. George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2017) and the more causal model-focused sociological literature (e.g. Abbott, 1992), cases are treated within a hypothetico-deductive model of science, as an equivalent to experiments in that they offer ‘tests’ of a theory. Hence, in some instances, a random selection among potential cases is recommended to limit ‘bias’. In this approach, the potential of the case to confirm or disconfirm a propositional theory about how variables work, is usually the goal (e.g. ‘Why is there no socialism in the United States?’; or ‘Do

theories about civil war work in a randomly selected case of Japan?'; or 'In 'typical' countries, how do variables of globalisation and welfare state retrenchment interact?' – Gerring & Cojocaru, 2016). In such a model, the contextual detail of the case is uninteresting, or indeed a hindrance to the real interest which is in observing the hypothesised abstract causal mechanisms assumed to apply across cases.

In his book 'Making Social Science Matter', Flyvbjerg (2001) questions the appropriateness of this hypothetico-deductive tradition to understanding complex human social and political cases, which he argues are better considered as multiply determined, by a complex concatenation of contingent historical processes. Flyvbjerg contends that there is much to be learned by exploring the concrete unfolding of events in time. Those events are likely to be messy, and understanding that very 'mess' is a valid endeavour, rather than excluding the 'mess' for a focus on pre-determined abstract variables (Law, 2004). The concrete particulars of the case, in its wholeness and its uniqueness, matter, and the case itself is worthy of investigation, not only as an instrument to test an abstract theory. The main body of this paper, below, aims to develop ways of thinking about resituating knowledge that do not rely on making abstract, universalising claims, but that make claims founded in particulars, which 'generalise' by speaking to concrete audiences' experiences and knowledge.

Arguments about the possibility of generalisation have social and political, as well as epistemic implications. For scholars presenting evidence from in-depth case studies in settings where hypothetico-deductive reasoning is dominant, a challenge about the generalisability of their study is a predictable response. Matthew Desmond's (2016) ethnography of eviction in Milwaukee presents a carefully researched and shocking account of the devastation wrought by the property market, especially eviction, for people on low incomes in one USA city. The book follows the lives of eight families over some years, contextualised with careful statistical research on the broader patterns of housing and homelessness in Milwaukee. He claims that the patterns of evictions are similar in other cities, suggesting that the experiences which he documents in the ethnography are likely to occur in other places too. But more interestingly, he also problematises the question of generalisability:

I wonder sometimes what we are asking when we ask if findings apply elsewhere.[...] maybe what we are really asking when we ask if a study is 'generalizable' is: Can it really be this bad everywhere? Or maybe we're asking: Do I really have to pay attention to this problem? (Desmond, 2016, pp. 333–334)

In other words, there are political implications of claiming that something is general or that it is exceptional, or too unique to learn from. In the Grenfell case, official responders repeatedly said that the disaster was 'unprecedented' and exceptional. Of course, this is true in many respects. But framing it as exceptional suggests that it could not have been better planned for, or dealt with any better. If it is exceptional, if it does not reflect generalities, then there is no obligation to

learn from it, or to change. And if the community is exceptionalised as ‘angry’ or ‘oppositional’, then the sources of the anger and the dysfunctional relation with authorities need not be engaged seriously or prioritised. At a meeting of emergency planners I attended, a senior government official particularised the Grenfell community, saying that, in response to disasters, some communities respond with anger, some respond with appreciation of the authorities’ response and claimed that the North Kensington community was ‘an angry community’. Again, this particularisation exonerates the processes and actions that led to those expressions of anger and shuts down an opportunity to examine how poor governance, mismanagement, miscommunication, or other failures might have produced such anger, and how alternative official responses might avoid or mitigate such failures.

In contrast, many survivors, bereaved families and others affected by Grenfell, emergency management professionals, charities and some local authorities are eager to reflect on the significance of the disaster response, in order to ‘learn lessons’ about contemporary disaster responses and how to improve them, for future, non-identical disasters. In meetings and conferences, sessions reflecting on ‘lessons learned’ from Grenfell have been organised. Charities have published reviews and recommendations based on their experiences in the Grenfell response. Once Grenfell United, the major group of survivors and bereaved had made headway with its work advocating for the needs of affected individuals, it turned its attention to the cause of preventing such a disaster from happening again, by campaigning for changes to building regulations, and remedial works on buildings with similar cladding.

While instrumentalising a disaster to turn it into a lesson, or de-particularising the unique human lives it affects, may entail ethical risks, it also seems ethically and politically problematic to refuse to acknowledge that there is something to be learned about broader, and changeable, structures or processes in which we participate.

In what follows, I propose a dialogical perspective on the challenge of how knowledge may be meaningfully resituated, which I term ‘communicative generalisation’. I first establish a theoretical grounding for communicative generalisation, and then go on to explore four dialogical modes of communicative generalisation which I have considered in developing this study. These four are not exhaustive of the potential modes of communicative generalisation, but they serve to elaborate what communicative generalisation could be. They have themselves been developed out of my engagement with the concrete details of this case.

Towards communicative generalisation

The main presupposition of dialogical perspectives is that the mind of the Self and the minds of Others are interdependent in and through the sense-making and sense-creating of social realities, in interpretations of the past, experiencing the present and imagining the future. (Marková, Zadeh, & Zittoun, this issue)

The interdependence of the minds of authors and readers is at the heart of what I want to propose as dialogical (communicative) means of generalising from case studies. If knowledge is intersubjective, the way it generalises is through the minds of others, not through reflecting an abstract universal truth. From this perspective, generalisation depends on the significance of knowledge to epistemic communities.

The challenge for the researcher, then, is a dialogical challenge of *addressivity*. Addressivity is a Bakhtinian concept pointing to the character of utterances that they are always directed towards someone; they are crafted to speak to a particular listener or group of listeners (Bakhtin, 1986). An utterance does not have a meaning outside of a communicative relationship. To be re-situated, then (or to 'generalise' to a new context), a social scientific statement addresses a particular audience, in such a way that it can be responded to by that audience. The research needs to speak to the interests and perspectives of its potential audiences, which might include, for instance, psychological scholars, emergency planning practitioners and/or local affected people.

This perspective also suggests that generalisation is not established until a social scientific claim or argument is responded to by an interlocutor. If, as George Herbert Mead (1934) put it, the meaning of an utterance is determined by the response of the other, the social scientific statement becomes meaningful when it elicits a response in a reader. Generalisability cannot be guaranteed by the research design, the case selection or the sampling (though these may help). To generalise, knowledge needs to be taken up, used, or acted upon, by other people in other contexts. I explore four ways in which such communicative generalisation takes place, in turn, in what follows.

Generalising as building a rich generalised other

Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that case study scholarship generalises through the development of readers' expertise in the workings of social institutions. Our 'practical wisdom' (*phronesis*) grows, primarily, from first-hand involvement in the mess of complex social reality. Just as surgeons become experts through a decade of practising surgery on different bodies, with different combinations of symptoms, under different conditions, he suggests, social scientists become experts through engaging with a diversity of complex, human social situations. In order to develop expertise, Flyvbjerg (2001) argues, the next best thing to hands-on personal involvement is learning from a rich detailed case study. Reading a case study which explores its topic in its whole, historical, contingent and messy context, charting its tensions, movements, controversies, and dynamics, develops our practical wisdom through vicarious experience. The value of the case will be made when that expertise is applied to a new case, with greater insight, finesse, attention to the important details, ability to anticipate events and to act on them if relevant. This is a kind of 'practical generalisation': it makes the reader better equipped to act in the next messy situation.

Flyvbjerg wrote about case studies which were not necessarily dialogical case studies, not necessarily concerning self-other interdependence or multiple perspectives, and drew on theories of expertise drawn from studies of technical skill (football, surgery), more than social skills. When our 'practical wisdom' is about the selves and minds and actions of other people, it has a particular character, and different demands, compared to mastery of a craft. Here Mead's (1934) concept of the 'generalised other' may be a helpful extension to the idea of generalising through practical wisdom.

A central concern for Mead was to understand the possibility of humans 'taking the attitude of the other', which was for him the condition making it possible for humans to have reflective selves, to engage meaningfully with others and to co-ordinate in a mass society (Mead, 1934). He argued that, through engaging in repeated social acts with others, we learn to take the perspectives of specific others, which allows us to form an image of ourselves from the standpoint of others, and thereby to adjust our words and actions to the perspective of others, enabling co-ordination with them. In this process, we become effective social actors capable of engaging meaningfully with the specific others in our environment. However, evidently, we are also able to co-ordinate with strangers. To understand this process of re-situating our specific knowledge in a new context, Mead puts forward the concept of the generalised other. Out of our multiple interactions with multiple different others in particular roles and contexts, he suggests, we develop a more abstract perspective from which to understand our selves and others, namely the generalised other (Gillespie, 2005). For example, by interacting with multiple healthcare professionals, we build an expectation of how healthcare professionals tend to interact with us in a consultation, what kind of information they want to know from us and how to prepare ourselves to get what we want from the consultation. Meeting a new doctor, we use our 'doctor generalised other' to help us to guide our action. As laypersons, we are continually building our generalised others. As social scientists, from an experiential basis of engaging in complex fieldwork situations, we develop a rich generalised other, as one form of expertise.

Bringing this idea of the generalised other to the problem of how we advance knowledge (or generalise) through case studies, in reading a dialogical case study which brings to life the perspectives of others, we become more skilled at taking the perspectives of those specific others. And reading across multiple case studies, combining those readings with our own empirical experience, we may develop a more sensitive generalised other. As Mead elaborated, taking the perspectives of others enables coordination, as actors adjust their utterances and acts to the perspectives of their interlocutors. This process of adjustment, anticipating how fellow humans might react to the next unknown and unique unfolding event, is a social version of the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) explored by Flyvbjerg (2001). The event might not be another tower block fire, or a community mobilising against the threat of AIDS, but, for disaster-affected people, practitioners and social scientists who have worked intensively with, and read dialogical case studies of, communities

in contexts of existential threat, asymmetries of power, and distant authorities, their prior knowledge may partially generalise to a new situation, using their generalised other to imagine the perspectives from which people act, and thus to intelligently anticipate and respond to those perspectives.

This is how I interpret my sense of familiarity, or ‘resonance’ (Tracy, 2010), in the Grenfell case, to which I referred above: as a generalisation of my understanding of the perspectives of people coping with existential threats in conditions of extreme asymmetries of power, and distrust of authority. That generalised other prompted me to anticipate, for example, how the introduction of resources (such as grants to organisations, or access to powerful decision-makers) can create tensions and conflict, and that the definition of who is eligible for those resources is likely itself to become site of contestation. In writing about this case, I aim to elaborate the local perspectives from which the provision of resources becomes a problem (as well as a solution), with the purpose of building readers’ generalised others and thus their capacities to anticipate people’s responses in different, future scenarios, to the provision of resources and to find ways of developing responses that are sensitive to local conditions.

In this first mode of communicative generalisation, I have suggested that rather than generalising abstract claims, a dialogical case study can advance the reader’s generalised other, thus enriching the reader’s flexible, practical wisdom regarding other people’s perspectives and thus preparing them for sensitive future action.

Generalising as problematising

This second mode of communicative generalisation focuses on the question of ‘significance’. Bauer and Gaskell (2000) propose ‘significance’ as an alternative goal to ‘generalisation’ for qualitative research. Conceptualising ‘significance’ as a communicative challenge suggests that researchers need to dialogically engage with existing knowledge held by an epistemic community. An observation or a fact is significant in relation to some content – a prior set of assumptions, a body of existing knowledge. And it is significant for some audience. This frames the problem of generalisation and the task in a different way. The problem is not that the case is unique and not generalisable, but that the knowledge created might be of interest only to the researcher. The researcher’s task is to make the knowledge of significance to a wider community of scholars, and we do this by making connections between the case and wider theories and literature, answering the ‘so what?’ question.

‘Analytic generalisation’ or ‘generalising to theory’ is one approach that has been offered (Yin, 1994). A case study might confirm or illustrate a theory, or it might falsify a theory, in hypothesis-testing terms. Alternatively, a case study might present a surprise in relation to theories or assumptions (Larsson, 2009; Zittoun, 2017), expanding how we conceptualise issues, suggesting a new set of problems, or new way of considering old problems or issues. If scholarship aims to expand how we conceptualise issues, to help us to think differently, then a case

study's significance lies in how it troubles existing theories or assumptions or taken-for-granted, and offers something new and different. In this mode, a completely unique case does not work on its own, but when it is brought into dialogue with, or contrast to, existing assumptions and theories, when we establish a 'contribution to the literature'. To make generalisation possible, authors need to work on the addressivity of their work, considering which epistemic communities and arguments the work is relevant to. Cases are 'made', not 'selected'.

Ethnographies often function as problematising cases. Classically, ethnography is a good method for accessing the informal, the unwritten rules, the way things are done – often in contrast to the formal, the official, the way things are supposed to be, the way they are talked about. In policy-relevant settings, a classic ethnographic narrative shows that in practice, activities or interventions or organisations do not function in accordance with the manual, or the official guidelines, or the authorities' claims about what is done and why. In this mode, in a way similar to the 'deviant case' rationale, ethnographies problematise assumptions about how things 'should be' and how they are actually practiced. They offer 'facts' in relation to a policy expectation, or in relation to widely-held, or narrowly-held assumptions. William Foote Whyte's 'Street Corner Society' (1943), an ethnography of a Boston slum in the 1940s problematised the assumption that poor neighbourhoods were disorderly, chaotic and hazardous. Through participant observation, Whyte observed a strong social order, including the active management of risks and curtailment of violence. Loïc Wacquant (2004), in an autoethnography of learning to box, conducts a case study both of himself being made into a boxer, and of one boxing gym in Chicago. Like Whyte, he shows that a practice (boxing), assumed by some to be violent, unpredictable and disorderly, is in fact characterised by a high degree of order, respect and discipline. So, he takes his own case of socialisation as a boxer to problematise assumptions about boxing. I referred above to my own efforts to problematise the particularisation of the North Kensington community as 'angry' or 'oppositional' and of the disaster as 'exceptional'. By contextualising expressions of anger in a long history of neglect, silencing and undermining of public assets, an immediate context in which the authority responsible for the community's recovery is under investigation for being at fault in causing the disaster, and an experience of abandonment and lack of leadership in the official response, expressions of 'anger' seem to tell us more about the situation and less about some intrinsic character of the community. Exploring the structural conditions that allowed a fire of this nature to occur, in a block of social housing, many of whose inhabitants were racialised as North African, brown, black and/or Muslim, in this most economically unequal London borough, after multiple warnings within government of the necessity of reviewing fire regulations were ignored, challenges the idea that the disaster was 'exceptional' (El-Enany, 2019). The catastrophe was not arbitrary. Its conditions were set by structural processes that continue to place other marginalised, racialised and stigmatised communities at risk, and by a neoliberal deregulatory regime which treats fire regulations as obstacles to profit rather than as safeguards of life. This case is

significant in its own right, but it is also made more widely significant by carefully detailing how the case problematises significant assumptions – about communities, and about disasters.

Such research endeavours do their work of ‘advancing knowledge’ partly by their engagement with and problematisation of widely-accepted assumptions. ‘Knowledge’ here is not a fact about a behaviour, or a claim standing on its own, but an argument with a counter-position. The ‘generalisation’ here (understood as establishing significance for an epistemic community) is dialogical. The argument is interesting and the data meaningful because they challenge an existing position or perspective.

Generalising by addressing multiple audiences

In February 2018, I sat beside a community organiser from North Kensington in the audience of a public lecture at the London School of Economics (LSE) reflecting on lessons from Grenfell. A highly-regarded scholar presented colour-coded maps, indicating levels of socio-economic disadvantage in North Kensington and the stark inequalities across different postcodes in the borough. His analysis was about intolerable levels of inequality in Britain and the need for political change, a position with which many Kensington residents agree, and he was apologetic about his limited expertise in this case. As he talked, I felt uncomfortable about the people I knew being objectified and characterised as ‘poor’ or ‘deprived’, and about a still very current, complex human disaster being taken as opportunity to ‘learn lessons’ or derive a more general, ‘bigger’ point, when the immediate suffering and ongoing complex demands seemed quite ‘big’ enough. My North Kensington friend afterwards confirmed my discomfort, saying it was weird to see her area described like that. The question of ‘making political capital’ out of the disaster had already been a vexed one. Party political campaigning had upset some residents who saw such campaigning as outsiders using people’s tragedy instrumentally for their political ends (Renwick, 2019), while some campaigners argued that the disaster was more than a personal tragedy and ought to be politicised, because it was political already.

The self-other relations in an academic public lecture are somewhat complex. Not only is the ‘academic-self’ talking to ‘academic-others’, but the ‘academic-self’ is also talking to ‘public-others’ whoever they might be. A community of academic-selves can comfortably use common terminology, such as ‘disadvantage’ or ‘poverty’ and taken-for-granted assumptions, which do not work so smoothly in different self-other relations. My point is not that social scientific concepts of inequality or disadvantage are themselves wrongly objectifying or dehumanising. Nor that people with lived experience of an issue are the only sources of authority on that issue. Those are over-simplifying positions, with plenty of history. But scholars often talk to each other about other people without thinking how their terms construct those other people. When those others are a part of the

conversation, the addressivity demands are different. The possibility of speaking to two audiences at once introduces tensions and challenges.

One of those challenges may be to do with generalisation. Dialogue implies respecting the unique particularity of dialogue partners (Marková, Zadeh & Zittoun, this issue), some of whom may be a part of, or representative of, the case under consideration. Treating the case as an instance of something more general tends to objectify it, to misrecognise its particularity. When ‘experts’ or ‘authorities’ talk about ‘the disadvantaged’ or ‘empowering poor people’ or ‘engaging with the community’, ‘giving them a voice’, it never sounds as if there is a person who would match or identify that description in the conversation. How would the speaker feel if the language was reversed to refer to oneself ‘being given a voice’ or ‘being an instance of the disadvantaged’? Of course it is possible to abstract and talk politics with concerned people: everyday conversation does it all the time. Language can be otherising to different degrees and in different ways.

This discussion brings me to suggest a different kind of generalisation, a consideration of whether one’s argument and language is capable of addressing multiple audiences. For example, one might ask: Could I make my argument in front of the people I have engaged with as part of the research, as well as in front of my scholarly community? Can I formulate a statement that I could make to representatives of the hated institutions widely seen to be culpable, as well as to representatives of the affected community? My argument is not that a scholar must be capable of doing so. Contested situations are multi-perspectival, and there does not exist a single universal truth or a middle ground that all sides would agree on. Addressing multiple audiences does not mean that each audience will agree or endorse or like what is being said. But the awareness of potential multiple audiences can be a stimulus for careful and accountable thinking. And following the ethical commitment of dialogicality to recognising the uniqueness and humanity of the other (Marková, Zadeh, & Zittoun, this issue), I would argue that all too often we continue to speak of human subjects as objects and that it would improve our work to consider people we write about as our dialogue partners, audiences for our analyses. Doing so would be a technique for making our research less objectifying and othering, and a technique for addressing multiple audiences simultaneously, with the possibility of resituating knowledge for multiple dialogue partners. The question would be ‘can my argument address multiple audiences?’ rather than ‘does my research generalise?’

Generalising by hearing multiple speakers

The above mode of generalising multiplies our audiences. On the other hand, we might also multiply the speakers. If the social world is multi-perspectival, a rich understanding of it, a good generalised other, comes from hearing those multiple perspectives.

‘Maximising variation’ is an approach to sampling cited by qualitative researchers intended to contribute to generalisability (Larsson, 2009). The argument goes

that there is likely to be a diversity of beliefs or experiences in a population or setting, and while qualitative research may not need to claim representativeness of the population (through, say a random sample), it should avoid sampling from such a narrow set of experience that its findings refer only to that limited portion of reality. Using theoretical criteria (theoretical sampling, Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researcher samples for diversity, thereby increasing the likelihood that the findings reflect a wide range of experience, and thus the findings may better generalise to a wider range of cases or settings. This approach is resonant with a concern with sampling bias in quantitative research.

From a dialogical point of view, it is necessary to recognise that there are multiple, interdependent perspectives in any social field, and it usually productive to investigate those multiple perspectives, for example, when research interests concern dialogical questions of tensions, contestation, negotiation, collaboration or conflict (Coultas, this issue). The purpose of doing so, however, is not so much to inch towards a more complete reflection of the whole case, but to investigate the inter-perspectival dynamics that produce the phenomena of interest. This theoretical perspective suggests that the kind of theoretical sampling to be employed would not start with static categories such as demographics, but by thinking about the nature of the pairings or groupings of interdependent perspectives that are active in a case. Sampling multiple diverse perspectives at the outset of research is an established way to make it possible for the outcome of the research to communicate a rich and nuanced situation (or a rich generalised other). Less widely enacted is the possibility of hearing multiple speakers as the outcome of a piece of research.

In the Grenfell context, the politics of representation have been bitterly contested. An event that is at once of intense personal concern is also an event of national significance. The world's media appeared and reappeared, telling versions of events which felt disconnected from local people's experience, or offended them, or in some cases, led to their being criticised or hounded on social media. Authorities repeatedly seemed to fail to understand the nature of the community and its needs. And a book length analysis, authoritatively presented and titled 'The Tower' (O'Hagan, 2018) aggressively undermined the integrity of local activists and their perspectives, raising intense anger, and a sense of the epistemic injustice of the question of whose voice had access to mass media amplification and whose did not.

In this context, as a researcher, I am intensely aware of the politics of representing others. I will write my interpretation of events, acknowledging it is my version, situated in a particular perspective. But with collaborators, we are also exploring ways of facilitating versions authored by local perspectives. We have drawn together 'timelines' of the community and official responses to the Grenfell Tower fire. The timelines record events in the unfolding of the spontaneous community response, the meetings, letters and decisions marking the development of the official response and the interaction between the two. They also catalogue documentation (photographs, announcements, flyers, meeting minutes, policy documents)

for each event. In the interest of facilitating multiple speakers, I am working with a participatory artist and a local co-researcher to develop visualisations of the timelines for public engagement, which is sufficiently sparse to allow individual stories and interpretation, but which also offers milestones, and documentary evidence that can be drawn on. We aim to offer a scaffold for people to respond, telling their own story, adding personal responses or debating with the significance of events which we have selected for inclusion. Local people who have been involved in the response have expressed interest in using such a format to make sense of their own experience in a very chaotic and overwhelming period, and also to refute or debate stigmatising accounts of their community or official accounts that do not match their experience. We also invite them to add to the events covered in the timeline. As a result, we hope to produce timelines that reflects multiple local voices. And we hope to facilitate multiple local versions of the unfolding of events, as an outcome of the research.

This kind of multivoiced storytelling is not ‘generalisation’ in the sense of creating a ‘more general’ or ‘more uniform’ or ‘average’ or ‘abstract’ understanding. Instead, it aims to allow the listener or reader to develop a complex understanding, which incorporates multiple, perhaps inconsistent perspectives.

Conclusion: Temporality and agency in dialogical generalisation

In this paper, I have sought to develop the idea of ‘communicative generalisation’, through exploring four processes through which knowledge based in empirical research can speak to audiences in other contexts. These four modes of communicative generalisation are not comprehensive or exhaustive of the possibilities of communicative generalisation. They are not the result of an over-arching ‘top-down’ theoretical project of mapping out the whole field, but have arisen ‘bottom-up’ from my engagement with a particular case. There are of course other modes through which research can achieve communicative generalisation, which have not been explored here. For instance, ‘analytical generalization’ refers to the process of ‘generalising to theory’, where empirical cases are connected together by virtue of advancing theory. This could be considered a form of ‘communicative generalisation’, as it connects with the interests of an epistemic community by referring to and advancing common theoretical reference points. There are surely numerous other means through which scholars strive to make their work communicate to others, whose elaboration could help to develop further the idea of communicative validity.

This communicative perspective has implications for the temporality, the agency and the politics in generalisation. It suggests that generalisation happens not at the final stage of a study, but right at the start. Past knowledge gains generality if it answers to a new case. The significance of a case to the researcher, and to implied readers, evolves and changes with the development of the research and analysis. A case, in its concrete particulars, can call for some kinds of theorising over others, and thus the case itself, in its uniqueness, has agency in this

relation. This is how I described my arrival at studying Grenfell as a case: in encountering the field, my prior knowledge generalised to that field, or answered to that field, helping to make sense of it. Others have suggested forms of ‘reader generalisation’, in which the reader determines whether a ‘transfer’ between empirical settings or between case and analytical claims is appropriate (Kvale, 1996; Seale, 1999; Tracy, 2010). Building on this idea, I have proposed that the dialogical concept of addressivity offers a useful theorisation of the relation between researcher and audience in ‘reader generalisation’. If generalisation is communicative, it is subject to the power dynamics of communication: there is a politics of which knowledge is remembered, forgotten, silenced or generalised. There is a politics of who has power to recognise an advancement of knowledge. Larsson (2009) notes that the move of ‘reader generalisation’ changes the power relation between researcher and audience, in that the audience is the judge of transferability. Readers have agency to determine the generalisability of the case. ‘Communicative generalisation’ thus recognises a distribution of agency among authors, cases and readers, in keeping with a dialogical ethical commitment to respecting the uniqueness and humanity of dialogue partners.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The work on which this paper is based was made possible thanks to an award from the LSE Knowledge Exchange and Impact Fund.

ORCID iD

Flora Cornish  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3404-9385>

References

- Abbott, A. (1992). What do cases do? Some notes on activity in sociological analysis. In C. C. Ragin & H. S. Becker (Eds.), *What is a case? Exploring the foundations of social inquiry*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 53–82.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays* (Trans. Vern W. McGee). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bauer, M. W., & Gaskell, G. (2000). *Qualitative research with text, image and sound: A practical handbook for social research*. London, England: SAGE.
- Cornish, F., & Campbell, C. (2009). The social conditions for successful peer education: A comparison of two HIV prevention programs run by sex workers in India and South Africa. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *44*, 123–135.

- Cornish, F., Campbell, C., & Montenegro, C. (2018). Activism in changing times: Reinvigorating community psychology – Introduction to the special thematic section. *Journal of Social & Political Psychology, 6*(2), 526–542.
- Cornish, F., Montenegro, C. R., van Reisen, K., Zaka, F., & Sevitt, J. (2014). Trust the process: Community health action after Occupy. *Journal of Health Psychology, 19*(1), 60–71.
- Cornish, F., Shukla, A., & Banerji, R. (2010). Persuading, protesting and exchanging favours: Strategies used by Indian sex workers to win local support for their HIV prevention programmes. *AIDS Care, 22*, 1670–1678.
- Coultas, C. (this issue). The performativity of monitoring and evaluation in international development interventions: Building a dialogical case study of evidence-making that situates ‘the General’.
- Desmond, M. (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. London, England: Penguin.
- Dhungana, N., & Cornish, F. (in press). Beyond performance and protocols: Early responders’ experiences of accountability demands in the emergency response to the 2015 Nepal earthquake. *Disasters*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12425>
- Dhungana, N. (2019). *The politics of citizen-centric governance in post-earthquake Nepal* (PhD thesis), London School of Economics & Political Science, UK.
- El-Enany, N. (2019). Before Grenfell: British immigration law and the production of colonial spaces. In D. Bulley, J. Edkins, & N. El-Enany (Eds.), *After Grenfell: Violence, resistance and response*. London, England: Pluto Press, 50–61.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gerring, J. (2017). *Case study research: Principles and practices*. (2nd ed). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Gerring, J., & Cojocar, L. (2016). Selecting cases for intensive analysis: A diversity of goals and methods. *Sociological Methods & Research, 45*(3), 392–423.
- Gillespie, A. (2005). G.H. Mead: Theorist of the social act. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 35*(1), 19–39.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Jovchelovitch, S. (2007). *Knowledge in context: Representations, community and culture*. London, England: Routledge.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. London, England: Sage Publications.
- Larsson, S. (2009). A pluralist view of generalization in qualitative research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education, 32*(1), 25–38.
- Law, J. (2004). *After method: Mess in social science research*. London, England: Routledge.
- Marková, I. (2007). *Dialogicality and social representations: The dynamics of mind*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Marková, I., & Gillespie, A. (Eds.) (2007). *Trust and distrust: Sociocultural perspectives*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Marková, I., Zadeh, S., & Zittoun, T. (this issue). Introduction to the special issue on generalisation from dialogical single case studies.

- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviourist*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- O'Hagan, A. (2018). The tower. *London Review of Books*, 40(11), Retrieved from <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n11/andrew-ohagan/the-tower>
- Renwick, D. (2019). Organising on mute. In D. Bulley, J. Edkins, & N. El-Enany (Eds.), *After Grenfell: Violence, resistance and response*. London, England: Pluto Press, 19–46.
- Seale, C. (1999). *The quality of qualitative research*. London, England: Sage Publications.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight 'big-tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.
- Wacquant, L. (2004). *Body and soul: Ethnographic notebooks of an apprentice-boxer*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Weick, K. E. (2010). Reflections on Enacted Sensemaking in the Bhopal Disaster. *Journal of Management Studies*, 47(3), 537–550.
- Whyte, W. F. (1943). *Street corner society: The social structure of an Italian slum*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. London, England: Sage Publications.
- Zittoun, T. (2017). Modalities of generalization through single case studies. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, 51, 171–194.

Author biography

Flora Cornish is an associate professor in Qualitative Research Methodology at the London School of Economics & Political Science. She is a community psychologist with a focus on the role of community mobilisation in improving public health, in the light and shadow of globalising environmental, economic, political and social forces. She aims to do research that has transformative potential, with an interest in democratising knowledge, using qualitative methods, community collaborations, dialogues and theoretical resources that resonate with health-promoting struggles. Her current research learns from the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower disaster in West London.