Generalizing[1]

Joanna Latimer (SATSU, University of York) and Rolland Munro (University of Leicester)

Our aim in this chapter is to open up issues around generalizing in social science research. We counter-point a tendency to evidence explanatory hypotheses through the adding up of 'confirmatory' observations, with the radically different approach of arriving at understandings of 'world-making' through sustained contemplation of the instance. What we are putting into question is the modernist insistence on attaching a valuation of 'one' to any incident or event: to denote an instance as merely a 'specific case', a 'single example', a 'one-off'. This is not just because the one-off can be dismissed as irrelevant, to be treated as either something of little or no account or as the deviation that proves the rule. Rather, as ethnographers in two different fields, we both cherish the value of the *exemplar*, the moment, incident or instance that sums up what is going on and which seems to throw everything else into light.

One of the aporias of science is the multiplication of generalizations that are required to keep pace with the never-ending process of division within research. The analytic mode results in splitting phenomena, events and substance into ever-finer parts, a process that was supposedly put into reverse by the use of logic for its re-synthesis into meaningful theory. Yet as David Hume pointed out a century or so after Descartes revitalized interest in the analytical approach of the Greeks, logic is unable to add back the meaning that analysis has subtracted. This is because formal logic prohibits any move to generalize from the adding up of parts. While it is possible to begin with a universal like 'red' and proceed to find examples that appear to have the quality of redness, no amount of observations of swans permits whiteness to be the essence of swans.

The subsequent implosion of knowledge in the West has thus entailed a loss in meaning, a loss that has gone hand in hand with the fashion for metrics: measurement having long since been employed to reinstate what logic fails to add back. Inevitably, however, since the potential for measurement multiplies as fast as division works its possibilities, meaning becomes a receding horizon. As Dave Beer (2016) argues, at work, in the body, and in leisure

[1] In: Celia Lury et al. (eds.) *The International Handbook of Interdisciplinary Research Methods*. London: Routledge.

and consumption, uncertainty grows apace with the pressure to measure everything. It is as if people are seeking stabilities in identities by bolstering the ever-growing detail of life with ever-greater refinements in terms of numbers. Whatever counts counts; and the story of attempts by colleagues at the University of Edinburgh seeking to remove Higgs (of Higgs Boson fame) from his post because of a lack of publications for the research audit is salutary for all those magnifying themselves by watching their citations grow on sites such as Research Gate.

Pressing questions remain, nonetheless, over how, and when, the single instance is admissible. This is an issue that dominates more popular debates about generalizability; and rightly so in the face of governmental policies being driven by demands for more and more quantitatively based evidence. Examples of older people being left unattended on hospital trolleys for hours should be shocking and unacceptable, but they should not be interpreted as meaning the NHS is a failing institution that must be privatized. So, too, the call for quantitative evidence also affects the politics of everyday life: while we might feel sympathy with a person who was bullied at school in ways that soured their later life, we can all feel irritated when someone draws too broadly on an unfortunate experience of their own, such as a failed marriage, to argue marriage should be avoided by everyone else.

This brings us back to Hume's problem of induction. The positivist movement, which arose in the late nineteenth century and gathered pace in the early twentieth century, attempted to get round the embargo on turning observations ('This planet has life on it') into law-like theories ('All planets have life on them') by a reversal in direction that insisted on all 'meaningful' generalizations having to be stated in a theoretical form that permitted testable predictions to be drawn from them ('If all planets travel in an ellipse, then the Earth's orbit is elliptical'). This opened the way for Karl Popper's argument that, since science could never prove its law-like theories to be true, it had to look for contrary instances that falsified the theory. Indeed, increasing attention is now given to looking for the contrary case, the unpredictable outcome, as what has become popularized as 'black swans' (Taleb 2007).

World-making – in contrast to the illusion that there is a single, discernible universe 'out there' to which all pronouncements and propositions must refer – is directed towards knowing how each of us is drawing our ideas and experience together in ways that stabilize the 'buzzing, blooming confusion'. As Latour (1987) explains, what matters in science is not the truth of each single proposition, the conventional view about it, but whether or not things *hold together* more generally:

> A sentence does not hold together because it is true, but because it holds together we say it is 'true'. But what does it hold onto? Many things. Why? Because it has tied its fate to anything at hand that is more solid than itself. As a result no one can shake it loose without shaking everything else. (p.101)

Attempts to name this most elusive of human phenomena vary: complementary to the idea of world-making, anthropologists attend to cultures as shaping ideas, mores and beliefs, Kuhn referred to paradigms as generating theories in science, while Foucault talked about truth regimes and explained how discourse could discipline thought. So, too, the less totalizing notions of perspective and standpoint have taken on an extra weight of meaning, with (the later) Goffman also identifying 'framing' as exercising this kind of force.

The notion of world-making seems especially appropriate, therefore, for research in social science, where a key aim is to comprehend ways in which world-making is *organizing* what we or others are engaged in (Latimer and Munro 2015). Insofar as this requires a shift away from a focus on *what* we think, towards imputing what might be governing our thought, it might be that a more fecund alternative rests on the notion of *working backwards.* While a partial step towards this is captured in the pragmatist Charles Peirce's notion of abduction (a method distinct from induction and deduction in its positioning of generalizing as a heuristic), the roots of its more profound influence are to be found in Heidegger. Instead of finding himself always looking for 'something', asking say if it existed or not, Heidegger's (1959) deconstruction of metaphysics proceeded by questioning and re-questioning 'Why is there always something?' In persisting in his contemplation of this single question, he was eventually able to break open the stranglehold that Western metaphysics imposed on the existence/non-existence of things and ask the very different question 'Why is there something, rather than nothing?'

In reversing the usual mode of direction of generalizing, researchers in social science can ask: What are the conditions of possibility for a particular event to have taken place? This is to wonder: Can we re-visualize the world to make sense of what someone has done? Or ask: What kind of moral order would permit a person to engage in head-hunting (Rosaldo 1993)? This kind of questioning would also encompass coming to understand the very *absence* of events; for example, as Mary Douglas (1975: 4) noted, allowing a menstruating woman to cook would cause the cosmos of the Lele to collapse. Consider Marilyn Strathern's (1999) 'glimpse' of men half-running, with their path out of her field of vision:

> On my part, I shall never forget my first sight of mounted pearl shells in Mt Hagen, in 1964, heavy in their resin boards, slung like pigs on a pole being

> carried between two men, who were hurrying with them because of the weight, a gift of some kind. (p.8)

As Strathern says, she will never forget this image – the 'dazzle' of what she saw stayed with her over decades. Yet what is the status of such a 'glimpse'? Strathern (1999: 6) argues that seeing the men half-running with the weight of the mounted pearl shells – and it would prove that it had to be men because only men could offer this kind of gift since women were not allowed to handle pearl shells – was for her an *ethnographic moment*. For Strathern it was the relation that joined 'immersion' in the field of observation (concrete apprehension of facts) with 'movement' in the field of writing (abstract analysis). As she notes, 'What makes the ethnographic moment is the way in which these activities are apprehended as occupying the same (conceptual) space' (1999: 262).

Addressing the particular can also be an approach that constitutes the instance as an 'event' (Deleuze 1992): an irruption, bifurcation, a moment of irreducible dissonance, a transition that opens. We can note, then, when and how an account or a performance is treated Goffman-like (1963) as 'infraction' or even as one of Garfinkel's (1996) 'breaches'. Such moments can indicate what is held by some participants to be most precious in the culture concerned; and so work to preserve, or even intensify, the sacredness of what may 'pass' as acceptable and what may not. Alternatively, their value might also lie in their instantiating a moment of resistance, a moment in which the usual modes of ordering and backgrounding suddenly let the implicit come into view, including all that makes the truth hold.

So particulars need not be about representing through discounting specifics into numerals (or their verbal equivalents: one, many, most). This brings us back to the question of how does a Strathern make their examples trustworthy? As revealing something, rather than saying nothing? There is, to be sure, value in the 'surprise' finding, the contrary example that puts into doubt all that has been known before. But the true value of the illuminating example comes not only from evading the trap of making the example hold as a particular 'representation' of a universal truth or 'social fact', or from the rigour of the researcher's cross-checks and balances alone.

Good examples are much more profound: they are about grounding the part in the fabric of relations and associations, connections and disconnections that makes the particular possible. For example, the particular of what Riles (1998) calls 'a figure seen twice' is about bringing into the light the conditions in which the figure is being made possible. This is why Bauman (1989) is opposed to naming men like Hitler or Stalin as 'monsters'. As he suggests,

such easy nomenclature overlooks how the mores of administrative theory shape and 'adiaphorise' social relations in ways that enable the effacement of particular forms of personhood, and heinous acts to be carried out. The division of labour into specialist roles ensures that those who gather the names have no direct relation to the soldiers who put the people on the trains; with neither having any connection to the guards who run the camps or the people (sometimes prisoners themselves) who are given the task of pressing prisoners into the gas chambers.

The notion of world-making is also highly germane to interdisciplinary research. Inasmuch as proliferating specialization through the division of labour governs the growth of knowledge, it also affects the methods by which researchers from different schools or traditions can come together and collaborate. In this respect, it is not only the world-making of those being studied that should be the focus of research in attempting to understand what the devil it is they are up to. By the same token, researchers are encouraged today to be more reflexive about their own orientations and pre-judgements. This kind of exemplification is unfolded by Helen Verran (2001) in her description of the disconcertment she felt in Nigerian classrooms when observing one of her student Nigerian teachers conducting maths and science classes: the intense feeling that something in someone else's world-making is out of order, a sense that opens up the possibility of a different kind of world-making and confounds any possibility of a generalizing logic.

Certainly, this opening up of different kinds of world-making becomes a pressing concern in collaborative projects that draw together researchers from diverse disciplines and different countries. And, critically, attention to this issue can promote collaboration, dialogics and mutual reflexivity. Indeed, rather than take the positive road of looking to make predictions on the basis that there could be a robust general theory for different cultures, it is almost now a commonplace to attend to the possibility of multiple worlds, multiple logics, multiple identities. Yet attempts to generalize about the diversity of what is underpinning thought and action may not entirely allow for a different kind of multiplicity in world-making. This is to remember that extension takes place through relations of all types. Hence world-making not only takes place within the connections people make as they interpret things and relate ideas to their experience, worlds also get shaped and pre-figured within boardrooms of power and behind the scenes in clandestine meetings among people of influence. As such it seems preferable to assume that such matters as *Zeitgeist*, belief systems and perspective only *contribute* to world-making, but never act alone.

Ahead of closing, therefore, we want to go one step further and press another facet to generalizing that even these more radical forms of research overlook. As authors we have taken care to introduce into our own research the notion of motility (Munro 1996; Latimer 2013), allowing people to be much more motile, both in the self they perform and in the worlds they endlessly construct. So rather than identifying how many people act or speak in accordance with institutionalized routines and repetitions, or deviate in well-trodden ways, we have tried to explicate how *switches in extension* take place from moment to moment. Extension here could include attachment to tools, narrative tropes, situations, or involve other persons. Importantly these materials of extension body-forth specific meanings, ways of seeing or doing the world, by people as they go about their everyday lives. Such switches in extension thus alter the world, even if only momentarily or fractionally, and do so without disposing of existing or alternative possibilities, as is implied by concepts such as mutation and evolution.

Indeed, the potential to exercise motility may underpin power relations. Our drawing attention to how different worlds are kept in play, therefore, is not simply to point to the making and unmaking of identities (and worlds) as fluid (as if anything goes). On the contrary, our emphasis on motility is to help researchers attend to how, when and where switches in extension take place. Noting such matters helps illuminate the complexity at stake in how, when and where stabilities are being accomplished and re-accomplished. This is to adduce the precise moments and places when switches are made, including identifying how motility can become commonplace in accomplishing power relations at work (Munro 1999). And it is through this attention to how people and things become attached and detached that the stabilities or 'conditions' underpinning world-making can not only be made visible, but observed to change from time to time however momentarily. For example, Latimer (2013) in her study of the partial alignment of medicine and the new genetics, helps reveal how medical dominance is accomplished and re-accomplished not through purification, or the enactment of the scientific method alone, but also through switches in extension. In terms of motility sustaining medicine's dominance, those practising medicine can be observed to switch their attachment – at one moment they perform the medical gaze as a pure clinical moment through which people and their parts are objectified, in the next they reattach to persons as human beings.

In emphasizing these different facets of world-making, we have contested the orientation to generalize along a single line of investigation, severing relations in order to add up specific examples that are taken to be similar in one way or another. To generalize in

social science requires researchers to remain open to the manifold of relations and the far-reaching possibilities in world-making that connection (and disconnection) may take. So let us ask again: What value can we give the particular? Should we treat the exception as idiosyncratic, merely reinforcing the case for the normal by limiting their value to a form of deviance? Or do such matters draw attention instead to how people and their worlds are 'motile' – not only in manifesting different identities as they say or do things, but in effortlessly shifting their world-making from moment to moment as they alter their habits and routines from place to place?

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