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The Replication Debate in Qualitative Research: An Approach for Methodological Rigor and Transparency

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the growing debate over the relevance of replication in qualitative research, especially within language education. While replication has long been central to quantitative research as a means of ensuring generalizability, transparency, and methodological rigor, its applicability to qualitative paradigms remains contested. Advocates argue that replication, particularly in its conceptual form, can enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry by promoting transparency and reflexivity. Critics, however, question whether replication is compatible with qualitative traditions that emphasize contextuality, subjectivity, and co-construction. This paper explores these tensions by differentiating between generalizability and transferability and evaluating whether the notion of replication, originally rooted in positivist assumptions, can be reframed to align with qualitative values. The paper further examines alternative concepts such as analytic and intersectional generalizability. It concludes that the term replication may not fully capture the aims of many qualitative inquiries, and the broader goals of rigor, transparency, and meaningful knowledge-building can still be pursued through established qualitative practices. This discussion invites more nuanced approaches to evaluating quality in qualitative research by considering how replication aligns with, or conflicts with, the epistemological and methodological foundations of different qualitative paradigms.

Keywords: qualitative Research, replication, transferability, trustworthiness

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been considerable debate regarding the relevance of replication in qualitative research within the field of language education (Makel et al., 2022; Pownall, 2024; Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Traditionally, replication has been associated with positivistic quantitative methodologies that emphasize deductive reasoning and hypothesis testing. Many quantitative researchers have expressed concerns about questionable research practices and promoted efforts to enhance open science, transparency, and openness in research (Pownall, 2024). Therefore, the replication of research findings has been recognized as crucial for refining empirical evidence in quantitative research (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020). In particular, following prominent instances of data fabrication, replication has garnered increasing attention (Makel et al., 2021).

Recent discussions have also explored the potential for replication in qualitative studies (Makel et al., 2022; Pownall, 2024). In contrast to the consensus on the suitability of replication in quantitative research, significant debate persists over the appropriateness of replication in qualitative research. Some researchers, such as Makel et al. (2022), who advocate for replication in qualitative research, argue that replication is not only relevant but can also enhance transparency in qualitative research. They suggest that replication can address concerns about rigor by improving the reproducibility of the interpretive process (Makel et al., 2021, 2022). However, other scholars who are skeptical of replication in qualitative research question the compatibility of replication with the epistemological, ontological, and methodological foundations of qualitative research (Makel et al., 2024). They contend that replication may miss the core of qualitative research, which inherently relies on context, subjectivity, and researcher reflexivity (Pratt et al., 2020). The distinction between generalizability and transferability remains a central point of contention in this debate. The concept of transferability is considered one of the core rationales for advocating replication in qualitative research, which is "the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings, conducted among other respondents" (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021, p. 368).

Therefore, in this paper, I first discuss the similarities and differences between generalizability and transferability, explore the relationship between transferability and replication in qualitative research, and examine whether replication holds value in qualitative research. I then compare the paradigms underlying quantitative and qualitative research and explore how replication aligns with the fundamental goals of qualitative research in terms of paradigms.

2. Replication in Quantitative Research

Traditionally, replication has been associated with positivist quantitative methodologies that emphasize deductive reasoning and hypothesis testing. Replication is defined as "a new empirical study using new data that addresses the same or a similar research question and/or hypothesis as a previous study" (McManus, 2023, p. 3). Many quantitative researchers have expressed concerns about problematic research practices and have encouraged efforts to enhance openness, transparency, and accessibility in research (Pownall, 2024). As such, replication of findings has been acknowledged as important for strengthening and validating empirical evidence in quantitative research (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020). Interest in replication has particularly increased due to the frequent occurrence of data manipulation cases (Makel et al., 2021).

More specifically, replication has been acknowledged as a valuable methodology within quantitative empirical research for confirming, integrating, and advancing knowledge and understanding (Porte & McManus, 2019). Put differently, replication allows for "better understanding of how research data was collected, measured, analyzed, and interpreted. It also provides a systematic framework for reconsidering, improving, extending, and sometimes limiting previous findings" (McManus, 2023, p. 3). Replication achieves this goal by repeating the research design and methods of a previous study, and systematically comparing the new results with the original findings (Marsden et al., 2018).

These insights supporting the importance of replication in quantitative research rest on the presupposition of generalizability. To be considered a scientific discovery, a result must be replicable, and reporting procedures in a way that allows others to reproduce them enables the evaluation of a finding's generalizability. Simply put, replicability—through consistent effects and clear procedural descriptions—is a prerequisite for a result to be accepted as part of the scientific literature (Dunlap, 1926; LeBel et al., 2017). For instance, Burger (2009) successfully replicated Milgram's (1963) well-known obedience study, demonstrating that carefully conducted replications can strengthen confidence in the validity of expected outcomes. Additionally, replication efforts can provide estimates of a phenomenon's effect size and lay the groundwork for replication-extension studies, which further clarify underlying psychological processes and identify boundary conditions (e.g., Proctor & Chen, 2012). Thus, replication plays an essential role in advancing theory by confirming and disconfirming previous results (Marsden et al., 2018). The scarcity of replication studies raises concerns, as it implies an uncritical approach to knowledge accumulation and theory building. Therefore, replication has long been considered a fundamental component of

research reliability and progress in quantitative research (Peterson & Panofsky, 2021).

In summary, under the classical direct replication paradigm, researchers aim to validate existing theories by questioning the robustness of prior findings through re-testing the reported methods on a new participant sample (Brandt et al., 2014). Accordingly, in the quantitative paradigm, the goals of replication research are well-established and clearly defined.

3. Replication in Qualitative Research

Recent discussions have begun exploring the replicability of qualitative research as well (Makel et al., 2022; Pownall, 2024). Unlike the general consensus on the appropriateness of replication in quantitative research, there remains significant debate over whether replication is suitable for qualitative inquiry. Some scholars, such as Makel et al. (2022), advocate for replication in qualitative research, arguing that it not only holds relevance but also enhances transparency. They suggest that replication can help alleviate concerns over rigor by improving the replicability of interpretive processes. They also point out that replication in qualitative research can draw on the rich tradition of reflexivity by examining how different positionalities relate to differences in interpretation and inference. Replications conducted by researchers with diverse positionalities hold the potential to advance the field toward more transparent inquiry. Moreover, replication can not only highlight the importance of contextual exploration but also offer opportunities for triangulation across differing researcher perspectives.

On the other hand, skeptics of replication in qualitative research question whether replication is compatible with the epistemological, ontological, and methodological foundations of qualitative inquiry (Pownall, 2024). They argue that replication may overlook the very essence of qualitative research, which relies fundamentally on context, subjectivity, and researcher reflexivity (Pratt et al., 2020). For example, Carminati (2018) argues that we should reject the idea that true knowledge is limited only to what can be replicated across different times and places. Instead, context-dependent knowledge, which can be expressed in various ways, can offer valid insights. Within qualitative approaches, in which continuous interaction between human agents and their surrounding contexts is central, context-dependent knowledge best captures the essence of qualitative inquiry. Such knowledge may take a different form in terms of its replicability and applicability (Delmar, 2010).

4. Generalizability vs. Transferability: A Core Issue in Replication Debates

The distinction between *generalizability* and *transferability* remains a central issue in debates over whether replication is relevant in qualitative research. Both concepts concern the ability to apply the results and/or concepts of one study to other people, contexts, or times (Mayring, 2007). Researchers use data not only to inductively generate new concepts and theories but also to consider how findings might be applied deductively to similar cases, contexts, and periods.

In quantitative research, generalizability is a key presupposition that underpins the importance of replication. Put differently, by reporting procedures in a way that others can replicate, researchers can assess the replicability and generalizability of their findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe generalization as "a claim of enduring value independent of context" (p. 110). When quantitative approaches are appropriately applied, it is believed that reliable results from representative samples can be extended to broader populations or different settings (Smith, 2018).

In contrast, in some areas of qualitative research, the concept of transferability has replaced generalizability. Transferability is one of the core justifications for replication in qualitative research. It refers to "the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts or settings, conducted among other respondents" (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021, p. 368). In other words, it involves abstracting similarities across comparable people, contexts, or times.

Transferability differs from generalizability in that it depends on the reader, not the researcher, to critically assess the similarity between the study context and their own (Campbell, 1986; Hellström, 2008). It is the reader's responsibility to evaluate the study's context, sample, and scenario to determine whether the findings are transferable (Hellström, 2008). In qualitative research, transferability focuses less on collecting representative data and more on the researcher's analysis and understanding of the context (Delmar, 2010). Relatedly, Cronbach (1975) argued that generalizations in qualitative research should be seen as 'working hypotheses', not final conclusions. Transfer is provisional and must be assessed for its relevance and usefulness in new contexts, settings, and populations. However, a detailed, thick description of the original sample, context, and time can support transfer to new, unstudied cases. Importantly, transfer is not universal.

5. Transferability and Conceptual Replication

Researchers who advocate for replication in qualitative research often base their arguments on transferability. They still acknowledge the difficulty of exact replication, and instead argue for the possibility of conceptual

replication (Makel et al., 2022; Plucker & Makel, 2021). Conceptual replication allows for nearly every aspect of the original study to be altered (McManus, 2023). It is defined as "repetition of a test of a hypothesis or a result of earlier research with different methods" (Schmidt, 2009, p. 91). Put differently, it tests the same general research question or hypothesis as the original study but uses different research designs and/or methods (e.g., different data samples or instruments). Unlike close replications with only minor modifications, conceptual replications often involve substantial differences that can complicate meaningful comparisons (McManus, 2023). Conceptual replication does not focus on systematically verifying and reinforcing methodological claims. Rather, it aims to establish general theoretical or conceptual claims.

However, in qualitative research, it is not new to conduct studies that explore the same research question in different contexts, with different participants, and using different methods. For instance, many researchers have studied how students invest in language learning inside and outside classrooms, and today we can find many qualitative studies on investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015) in diverse settings. When researchers provide thick descriptions of research environments, participants, and observed processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), readers can critically assess how applicable the findings are to their own contexts.

However, studying the same research question in qualitative research still differs in purpose from conceptual replication in quantitative research. In quantitative research, concerns arise that excessive variation in conceptual replications might hinder meaningful comparisons (McManus, 2023). This concern implies that conceptual replication in quantitative research still operates under a presupposition of generalizability. In contrast, qualitative conceptual replication does not aim to determine whether previous findings can be precisely replicated.

Moreover, even when it comes to conceptual replication, researchers differ in their views on its relevance, which may depend on the type of qualitative inquiry in which they are involved. For example, researchers conducting positivist-leaning content analysis will approach replicability very differently from those using interpretative phenomenological analysis grounded in a social constructionist perspective (Pownall, 2023). This distinction aligns with Kidder and Fine's (1987) small q/Big Q framework: small q research operates within a positivist paradigm, is largely technical, and emphasizes the use of tools and techniques. In contrast, Big Q research is interpretive, nuanced, and deeply tied to philosophy and procedure.

Researchers working within small q paradigms—such as content analysts or grounded theorists—may view replication (theoretical or conceptual) as a way to refine and build theory (Plucker & Makel, 2021;

Stroebe & Strack, 2014). These scholars argue (e.g., Leppink, 2017) that if data saturation has been reached, repeating a study with similar participants should yield similar results. Put differently, qualitative researchers often stop collecting data once they judge that no new insights are emerging. If all decisions and procedures are well-documented, then replicating a study with a similar sample can be a practical way to assess whether saturation was realistic.

Conversely, scholars working from a Big Q approach—such as ethnographers or narrative analysts—may view replication with skepticism. These scholars believe that findings are inherently tied to the research context (Davies & Dodd, 2002) and prioritize understanding human behavior over predicting or generalizing it (Macionis & Gerber, 2010). In this paradigm, the researcher is an active instrument of data collection and interpretation (Hallberg, 2013). Since all aspects of the research are co-constructed by researcher and participants, replication attempts to "repeat" the study in a new context may seem misguided. Such efforts may be seen as fundamentally inadequate to capture the true nature and goals of qualitative inquiry (Kitto et al., 2008).

In sum, investigating the same research question using a different research design is nothing new in qualitative research. Readers evaluate how applicable the study's context and findings are to their own settings. However, even for qualitative researchers—particularly those working within a small q paradigm—this approach still serves a different purpose than conceptual replication in quantitative research. Their focus is not on assessing whether previous findings can be replicated, as in the quantitative paradigm.

6. Is the Term "Replication" Still Appropriate in Qualitative Research?

The term *replication* is traditionally rooted in quantitative approaches, where it refers to determining whether the same results can be reproduced under consistent conditions using the same procedures. Even *conceptual replication*, at its core, may not align with the nature of qualitative approaches, which operate within a postmodernist paradigm that seeks "subjective realities and multiple truths" (De Costa et al., 2017, p. 526). Given this background, the legitimacy of using the term *replication*—even in its conceptual form—for qualitative research is called into question. In this respect, it can be argued that the term *replication* is unnecessary in qualitative inquiry, as the field has already established principles and practices for examining theories and research questions (Pownall, 2023).

Qualitative researchers have sought to ensure the "goodness" of their qualitative investigations by providing evidence for the quality of their research (Riazi et al., 2023b). Four types of generalizability in qualitative research, in particular, may offer more appropriate framing. First, *Naturalistic generalizability* (Stake, 2013) refers to applying findings from one research

context to another similar context. This form of generalization relies on the reader's experience and their familiarity with the research topic and setting, comparing it to their personal or professional context. Second, *inferential generalizability or transferability* (Lewis et al., 2014) places responsibility on the researcher to provide enough contextual detail so that *readers* can judge the extent to which findings might apply to other situations or contexts. The degree to which naturalistic generalization can occur depends on the researcher's efforts to convey transferability within the report. Third, *analytic generalizability* (Lewis et al., 2014; Polit & Beck, 2010) involves interpreting findings in terms of existing concepts or theories, even if contexts or populations differ. This includes how researchers either develop new concepts or dismantle and rework existing ones to contribute to research knowledge (Smith, 2018). Fourth, *intersectional generalizability* (Polit & Beck, 2010) refers to the degree to which the research engages deeply enough with communities and their intersections (e.g., race, class, gender) to provide insights that are relevant across different cases. This requires researchers to be actively involved in their sample and context and to observe continuously to identify such intersections.

Additionally, trustworthiness is more ontologically compatible with qualitative inquiry and offers more nuanced perspectives on rigor. Specifically, Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined techniques for establishing each aspect of trustworthiness in qualitative research. For example, to enhance credibility, researchers may use triangulation (Riazi et al., 2023a). As alternatives to replication discourse, *triangulation* refers to the practice of using multiple methods, theories, perspectives, and data types to deepen understanding and enhance rigor (e.g., Shenton, 2004). Another strategy is *member-checking*, where participants assess the accuracy of the data and interpretations. *Dependability* involves clearly documenting the research process, including how data were generated and analyzed. *Confirmability* relates to the degree to which the findings are shaped by the participants and the data, rather than researcher bias. It can be supported through reflexivity, whereby researchers critically reflect on their assumptions, positionalities, and decision-making throughout the study (Riazi et al., 2023b). These terms can better reflect the practices of qualitative researchers who enhance depth and inclusivity by using multiple sources of data collection. Therefore, qualitative researchers might be better served by using established terminology that more appropriately captures the process of (re)exploring theories through qualitative approaches, rather than adopting the term *replication.*

7. Conclusion

This paper discusses the similarities and differences between generalizability and transferability, explores how transferability relates to

replication in qualitative research, and examines whether replication can hold value within qualitative traditions. Overall, the key issue in the debate over replication in qualitative research lies in the differing perspectives on generalizability between quantitative and qualitative paradigms. While both generalizability and transferability refer to the potential to apply data across contexts, transferability differs in that it does not imply universal applicability that transcends context. Given the context-bound nature of qualitative research, some have argued for the possibility of conceptual replication based on transferability. However, this differs fundamentally from traditional notions of replication, which focus on examining whether the same results can be replicated or not. Because of these philosophical differences, the term *replication* can cause confusion in qualitative research.

It is important to note that qualitative research is not a monolithic category. It encompasses a wide range of approaches, from small q research, which is largely technical, and emphasizes the *use of tools and techniques*, to Big Q research, which is interpretive, and nuanced. In particular, the applicability of the term replication becomes even more questionable in Big Q research, such as ethnography or narrative inquiry, because the researcher and participants co-construct all aspects of the research process (Hallberg, 2013). For example, depending on the researcher's positionality and relationship with the participants, data collection and interpretation can vary greatly, which calls into question the meaning of strict replication in qualitative research. In this context, this paper argues that while recent advocacy for replication studies in qualitative research reflects efforts to exploit traditional quantitative research criteria, such as generalizability, and reproducibility, to qualitative research (Riazi et al., 2023a), these efforts may be considered fundamentally inadequate to capture the true nature and goals of qualitative research (Kitto et al., 2008). Instead, using established terminology within qualitative traditions—such as *analytic generalizability* or *intersectional generalizability*—may better reflect the epistemological foundations of qualitative inquiry. This paper raises critical questions about how, why, and when replication might be considered reasonable in qualitative research. In light of these concerns, this paper encourages more nuanced and thoughtful discussions about how we, as researchers, define and conceptualize terms such as "replication," "qualitative research," and "rigor."

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