

6.2 Sampling in qualitative research

We saw in Section 2.1.3 that QUAN and QUAL research differ greatly in how they approach participant sampling. In quantitative studies the principle is

straightforward: we need a sizeable sample to be able to iron out idiosyncratic individual differences. Qualitative research, on the other hand, focuses on describing, understanding, and clarifying a human experience and therefore qualitative studies are directed at describing the aspects that make up an idiosyncratic experience rather than determining the most likely, or mean experience, within a group (Polkinghorne 2005). Accordingly, at least in theory, qualitative inquiry is not concerned with how representative the respondent sample is or how the experience is distributed in the population. Instead, the main goal of sampling is to find individuals who can provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation so as to maximize what we can learn. This goal is best achieved by means of some sort of ‘purposeful’ or ‘purposive’ sampling.

6.2.1 Purposive and theoretical sampling

Because there is always a limit to how many respondents we can contact or how many sites we can visit, we have to make some principled decisions on how to select our respondents, at which point to add additional participants to the sample and when to stop gathering more data. Even when our sample consists of one case only, we need to select the aspects of that case that we will focus on. (See ‘within-case sampling’ in Section 6.2.4.) Therefore, a qualitative study must have a sampling plan describing the sampling parameters (participants, settings, events, processes), and this plan should line up with the purposes of the study. Punch (2005) suggests that if it is not clear to us which cases, aspects, or incidents to study, it is usually worth devoting more work to developing the initial research questions.

In their influential work on grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) spoke about ‘theoretical sampling’, highlighting the fact that sampling should be a flexible, ongoing, evolving process of selecting successive respondents or sites, directed by our earlier discoveries so that the emerging ideas and theoretical concepts can be tested and further refined. Silverman (2005) explains that the term ‘theoretical sampling’ has been transferred from grounded theory to qualitative research in general, and in current practice it is typically used synonymously with ‘purposive’ sampling.

6.2.2 Iteration, saturation, and sample size

Researchers are in agreement that the participant selection process should remain open in a qualitative study as long as possible so that after initial accounts are gathered and analysed, additional participants can be added who can fill gaps in the initial description or can expand or even challenge it. This cyclical process of moving back and forth between data collection and analysis is often referred to as ‘iteration’.

Although iteration is a key process in qualitative sampling, it cannot go on for ever. When do we stop it? There are no rigid guidelines, but scholars

agree that ideally the iterative process should go on until we reach *saturation*. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined this as the point when additional data do not seem to develop the concepts any further but simply repeat what previous informants have already revealed. In other words, saturation is the point when the researcher becomes 'empirically confident' (p. 61) that he/she has all the data needed to answer the research question. In practice, however, researchers usually decide when to stop adding cases to a study based on a combination of theoretical saturation and pragmatic considerations such as available time and money (Eisenhardt 1989).

Finally let us address the fundamental question: how big should the sample size be in a qualitative study? After all, we can talk about the flexibility of the process of iteration but in reality most researchers need to make some sort of an initial plan about the sample size to schedule their investigation. The pragmatic answer is that, in my experience, an interview study with an initial sample size of 6–10 might work well. Using computer-aided data analysis we can increase the sample size to as many as 30, although that would probably be pushing the limits and would be barely manageable for a single researcher such as a postgraduate student. The point, though, is that a well-designed qualitative study usually requires a relatively small number of respondents to yield the saturated and rich data that is needed to understand even subtle meanings in the phenomenon under focus.

6.2.3 Specific sampling strategies

Purposive sampling can follow a number of different strategies depending on the research topic and setting. When designing the sampling plan, we also need to take into account feasibility issues (in terms of time, money, respondent availability) and—what is often ignored—saturation considerations. The more cohesive/homogeneous the sample, the faster the saturation, but at the same time, the narrower the scope of the project. The following list of the most common qualitative sampling strategies offers a sense of how wide we need to throw the net to be able to reach saturation in different research areas. As a preliminary, let me emphasize that it is very important to make the sampling strategy explicit right from the start so that we can convey the underlying logic to the readers of the final research report.

Relatively quick saturation can be achieved by the following three inter-related sampling strategies because they all aim at selecting participants who are similar in some respect:

- *Homogeneous sampling* The researcher selects participants from a particular subgroup who share some important experience relevant to our study (for example, they have participated in a study-abroad programme). In this way, this strategy allows us to conduct an in-depth analysis to identify common patterns in a group with similar characteristics.

- *Typical sampling* The researcher selects participants whose experience is typical with regard to the research focus (for example, they all study a foreign language as a school subject at an intermediate level with moderate success). This strategy assumes that we have a profile of the targeted attributes possessed by an 'average' learner. Although we cannot generalize from the results because we cannot claim that everybody will have the same experience, we can list the typical or normal features of the experience.
- *Criterion sampling* The researcher selects participants who meet some specific predetermined criteria (for example, company executives who failed an important language exam).

We can also gain valuable insight into an issue if, rather than selecting typical participants, we intentionally look at the whole range of possible responses, including very special cases. While this approach certainly increases the scope of the analysis, Duff (2006: 71) mentions that it also carries the potential problem of placing 'over-emphasis on possibly atypical, critical, extreme, ideal, unique or pathological cases, rather than typical or representative cases'. The following three strategies overlap to some extent:

- *Maximum variation sampling* The researcher selects cases with markedly different forms of experience (for example, L2 learners from all developmental levels). This process will allow us to explore the variation within the respondents and it will also underscore any commonalities that we find: if a pattern holds across the sampled diversity, we can assume that it is reasonably stable.
- *Extreme or deviant case sampling* Following the same logic as maximum variation sampling the researcher selects the most extreme cases (for example, the most motivated and demotivated learners). On the one hand, this allows us to find the limits of the experience; on the other hand, if even such cases share common elements, they are likely to be real core components of the experience.
- *Critical case sampling* The researcher deliberately targets cases which offer a dramatic or full representation of the phenomenon, either by their intensity or by their uniqueness (for example, in a language attrition study examining people who have completely forgotten an L2 they used to speak). Their case may be taken as the most salient or comprehensive manifestation of the phenomenon under scrutiny; in such situations researchers are not only interested in what they find but also in what they do not, because something that does not occur in such salient cases is unlikely to happen elsewhere.

As it often happens, the most practical and feasible (and of course most common) sampling strategies are the least sound from a theoretical point of view. Three such 'less principled' strategies are particularly well known:

- *Snowball or chain sampling* The starting point of this strategy is a principled list of key respondents, who are then asked to recruit further participants who are similar to them in some respect central to the investigation. This chain reaction can reach far, which is ideal in situations where the experience in question is rare.
- *Opportunistic sampling* This is an unplanned and potentially haphazard procedure in the sense that it is followed on the spur of the moment: while working in the field, the researcher sometimes comes across respondents who are 'too good to miss' and a decision to include them is made on the spot. The problem is that they are not always exactly what is needed, yet their selection is very much in line with the emergent nature of the qualitative inquiry.
- *Convenience sampling* This is the least desirable but the most common sampling strategy, at least at the postgraduate research level. It is not purposive but largely practical: the researcher uses those who are available. Of course, in an ideal world nobody would employ a convenience sample, but research (and particularly postgraduate research) all too often happens in less-than-ideal circumstances, under considerable time or financial constraints. One redeeming feature of this sampling strategy is that it usually results in willing participants, which is a prerequisite to having a rich dataset. On the other hand, saturation may not happen at all. Thus, this strategy may save time, money, and effort, but at the expense of credibility (Miles and Huberman 1994).

6.2.4 Within-case sampling

Although qualitative researchers are becoming aware of the importance of principled, purposive sampling, the process is usually applied only to selecting respondents, that is, to 'between-case sampling'. In some qualitative methods (for example, ethnography or case study) we need to extend our sampling plan to also include 'within-case sampling' (i.e. selecting data from the potentially available data pool concerning a participant), because we have to make regular decisions about when and how to collect data from a particular respondent, what aspects of the case to direct our attention to and which activities, locations, or events to focus on. In these decisions we need to be just as purposive with our choices as with the selection of informants.