

*From sampling and choosing cases
to analysis in qualitative research*

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Thinking Critically About Analysis

Overview


- A brief history of sampling in qualitative research
- Some key lessons for sampling
- The sample size
- Thinking about sampling in qualitative research differently
- Sampling and informing analysis—a case study methodology

Tracing a history of sampling in qualitative research

The Chicago School (1920s-1960s)—
'sampling' settings, documents, experts

Glaser and Strauss (1968)—
Theoretical sampling to discover substantive theory—openness, comparison, and emergence

Patton (1980)—
Purposeful sampling to fit the purpose of the study, resources, questions asked



Becker (1958)—
looking for **indicators** of less easily observed phenomena

Bertaux (1976)—
seeking **diverse cases** of socio-structural relations

Browne (1987)—
purposeful case sampling

Tracing a history of sampling in qualitative research

Strauss and Corbin (1986)—
Purposeful theoretical
including open, relational
and variational, and
discriminate samples
Corbin (2008)—
Concepts, memos,
elaboration, categories, and
developing theory

Mason (1996,2002)—
Purposive theoretical
sample of an empirical /
ontological *universe* –
selecting key comparisons
to develop and test an
argument

Finch and Mason (1990)—
Systematic, strategic,
reflective sampling in the
service of the research
question

Gobo (2008) Snowball,
emblematic, quote towards
a **representative sample**,
which is not predicted in
advance, but is found,
constructed and discovered
gradually in the field

Shaping and informing analysis

First, the role of qualitative research in social investigation:

“We contend that qualitative research—quite apart from its usefulness as a prelude to quantitative research—should be scrutinized for its usefulness in the discovery of ... theory”.
(Glaser and Strauss:1965:5)

Second, the focus of our investigation are social phenomena. To get at these we *sample* people, institutions, documents, media, settings, events, archive and secondary data, & etc.. We learn about their representativeness as we progress through the research.

But, third, do we discover theory (theoretical sampling), test theoretical constructs (purposeful sampling), or refine theory (purposive sampling)?

Shaping and informing analysis

- Sampling is *theoretically* framed because we generate data, do analysis, and discover theory interactively in the research.
- Sampling is *purposefully* framed by the questions we ask, social imaginary, research instruments, resources, and the audience for our research.
- Sampling is *purposively* directed and re-cast towards the purpose of refining theory into an intellectual puzzle about the social world.

The short and long shadows of sampling in qualitative research

How big is *n*?

Author	Sample size	Notes
Bertaux (1981)	15-30	Depends on the variety of structural experiences
Kuzel (1992)	6-8	Homogeneous sample (assertion, no evidence)
	12-20	Heterogeneous sample—“when looking for disconfirming evidence or trying to achieve maximum variation” (assertion, no evidence)
Morse (1994)	6	Phenomenological studies (assertion, no evidence)
	35	Ethnographies, grounded theory studies, ethno-science (assertion, no evidence)
	100-200	Qualitative ethology (assertion, no evidence)
Creswell (1998)	5-25	Phenomenological studies (assertion, no evidence)
	20-30	Grounded theory studies (assertion, no evidence)
Bernard (2000)	36	Most ethnographic studies seem to be based on this number (assertion, no evidence)
Guest et al. (2006:78)	6-12	‘...the codebook we created was fairly complete and stable after only twelve interviews...If we were interested in high-level, overarching themes...six interviews may have been sufficient’.
Corbin and Strauss (2008:149)	>5-6	‘It is doubtful that five or six one hour interviews can lead to saturation’ (assertion, no evidence)

I suggest that there is no *n*

A focus on a phenomenon:

A half dozen individuals with such knowledge constitute a far better 'representative sample' than a thousand individuals who may be involved in the action that is being formed but who are not knowledgeable about that formation. (Plummer, 1984: 101 emphasis in the original)

And sustained field work and reflection:

'...the best and most insightful research involves a long period of sustained fieldwork embedded in a social setting. A few interviews, a handful of focus groups or a period of autobiographical navel-gazing can never generate faithful renderings of the complexity of social life and its multiple forms of social action.' (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006:750)

Rethinking sampling in qualitative research—the stages

First, we get out of the swamp.

Secondly, we sample in the research.

Thirdly, we use a casing methodology.

Then finally, we write up.

Rethinking sampling in qualitative research

There are, I suggest, three samples, not one, in qualitative research

1. We sample phenomena (S^p)
2. We sample context (S^c)
3. And we sample theory (S^t)

Casing: a methodology, not something we study

$$S^{\text{phenomenon}}, S^{\text{context}}, S^{\text{theory}} \approx N$$

where N is the case

The '5 Cs' of a casing methodology:

- Control—organises
- Characterising—looking for attributes and relationships
- Conciliation—synthesis, reconciling
- Collegiality—making theoretical choices explicit
- Constraining—bounding units

It is the explanatory power of N that we need to justify in our writing.

An example:

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Savage M, Bagnell G. and Longhurst B (2001)
Ordinary, ambivalent and defensive: class
identities in Northwest England. *Sociology*
35(4):875-892.

Savage M, Bagnell G. and Longhurst B (2005)
Globalization and belonging. London, Sage.

Some reflections on sampling in qualitative research—a methodological tradition

- From theoretical, to purposeful, to purposive—the refining of a methodology of sampling in qualitative research.
- We make sampling decisions throughout the research process. These decisions cast shadows forward that shape and inform analysis.

Some reflections on sampling in qualitative research—considering sample size

- It is not helpful, I suggest, to think in terms of n interviews, n focus groups, n¹
- Our sample is sustained engagement and insight into phenomena, field work, and reflection.

¹ to conform with current ways of thinking in (qualitative) research we do sometimes have to state sample size to apply research instruments, in proposals for instance. Mason's (2002) strategy of developing a quota sampling frame is useful here, as is Guest G, Bunce A. and Johnson L (2006) How many interviews are enough: an experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods* 18(1):59-82

Some reflections on sampling in qualitative research

- I have argued that there are three samples, not one, in qualitative research. We sample phenomena, context, and theory.
- Casing methodologies shape and inform our analysis and explanation. It brings the three samples together towards refining theory about a social phenomenon.
- Casing constrains. It has the potential to demarcate the 'ecological boundaries' of specific cases. It is a methodological approach that allows us to make claims that relate the specific to the general.

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Nick Emmel (forthcoming) Sampling and choosing cases in qualitative research. London. Sage.