



# Sampling in Qualitative Research

Dr. Rania Albsoul

1

May 2021



# Learning objectives



**By the end of this lecture, you will be able to:**

- Differentiate between sampling in qualitative research and quantitative research.
- Identify approaches to sampling in qualitative research.
- Identify different types of purposive sampling.

# Introduction

- ▶ A sampling plan is the design for how to specifically choose sources for your data.
- ▶ A sampling plan is a formal plan specifying a sampling method, a sample size, and procedure for recruiting participants.
- ▶ A qualitative sampling plan describes how many observations, interviews, focus group discussions or cases are needed to ensure that the findings will contribute rich data.
- ▶ In quantitative studies, the sampling plan, including sample size, is determined in detail in beforehand but qualitative research projects start with a broadly defined sampling plan.
- ▶ The sampling plan in qualitative research is appropriate when the selected participants and settings are sufficient to provide the information needed for a full understanding of the phenomenon under study.
- ▶ Good qualitative researchers, at the very least, engage in **purposeful sampling**, which means that they purposefully choose data that fit the parameters of the project's research questions, goals, and purposes.

# Introduction

4

- ▶ While quantitative studies often aim to maximise statistical power through the use of as large a sample size as feasible, qualitative studies usually work with a small number of cases that are feasible to study in depth.
- ▶ While subjects/cases in quantitative studies are stripped of their context, the smaller numbers involved in qualitative research allows exploration of the detail and richness of the data collected.
- ▶ The setting, where sampling is carried out, is described in detail to provide thick description of the context, thereby, enabling the reader to make a transferability judgement.
- ▶ Sampling also affects the data analysis, where you continue decision-making about whom or what situations to sample next. This is based on what you consider as still missing to get the necessary information for rich findings.

# Introduction

- ▶ Sample sizes for qualitative research vary by technique but are generally small.
- ▶ Qualitative research involves **non-probability sampling**, where little attempt is made to generate a representative sample.
- ▶ Participants are always sampled deliberately, not at random in qualitative research.

# Introduction

- The sampling process in qualitative research is iterative and is expected to continue to develop and be refined during the research process.

*iterative sampling approach whereby the research team moves back and forth (iterating) between sampling and analysing data such that preliminary analytical findings shape subsequent sampling choices.*

- Analysis and interpretation of data collected after initial sampling feeds back to influence sampling methods and decisions regarding sample size.
- As the research progresses, and the sampling of additional data yields no further themes/ideas/concepts on analysis, the point of data 'saturation' is reached and sampling can cease.
- You review the analysis, findings, and the quality of the participant quotes you have collected, and then decide whether sampling might be ended because of data saturation. In many cases, you will choose to carry out two or three more observations or interviews or an additional focus group discussion to confirm that data saturation has been reached

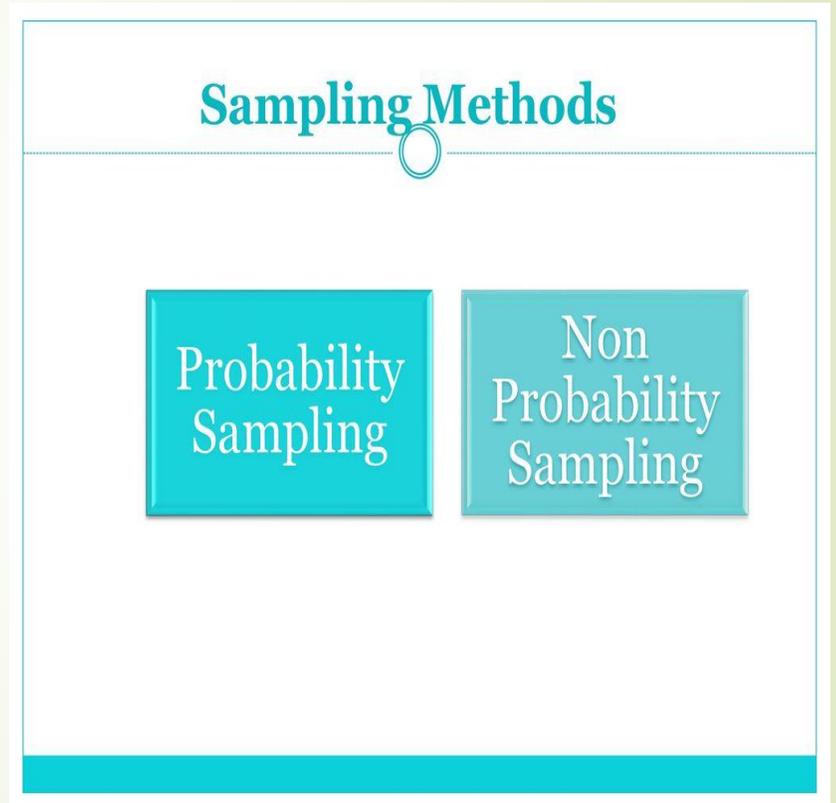
# Some practicalities

- ▶ You do not have to interview everyone (in a community, hospital, neighbourhood) to get a “good” sample.
- ▶ a critical first step is to select settings and situations where you have access to potential participants.
- ▶ Subsequently, the best strategy to apply is to recruit participants who can provide the richest information. Such participants have to be knowledgeable on the phenomenon and can articulate and reflect, and are motivated to communicate at length and in depth with you.
- ▶ Finally, you should review the sampling plan regularly and adapt when necessary.

# Types of sampling

- Probability sampling means that every member of the population has a chance of being selected. It is mainly used in quantitative research.
- If you want to produce results that are representative of the whole population, probability sampling techniques are the most valid choice.
- In a non-probability sample, individuals are selected based on non-random criteria, and not every individual has a chance of being included.
- Non-probability sampling techniques are often used in exploratory and qualitative research. In these types of research, the aim is not to test a hypothesis about a broad population, but to develop an initial understanding of a small or under-researched population.

May 2021



# Approaches to sampling in Qualitative Research

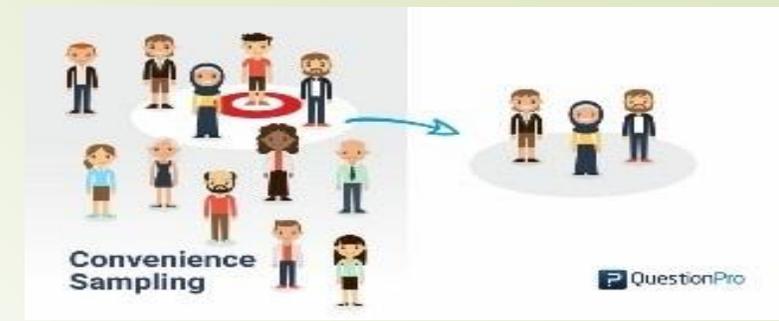
- Approaches to sample selection in qualitative research fall under two broad categories;
- **non-conceptually-driven approaches** (convenience and opportunistic sampling).
- **conceptually-driven approaches** (purposive and theoretical sampling).

# Sampling strategies in qualitative research

## Box 1. Sampling strategies in qualitative research. Based on Polit & Beck [3].

Sampling	Definition
Purposive sampling	Selection of participants based on the researchers' judgement about what potential participants will be most informative.
Criterion sampling	Selection of participants who meet pre-determined criteria of importance.
Theoretical sampling	Selection of participants based on the emerging findings to ensure adequate representation of theoretical concepts.
Convenience sampling	Selection of participants who are easily available.
Snowball sampling	Selection of participants through referrals by previously selected participants or persons who have access to potential participants.
Maximum variation sampling	Selection of participants based on a wide range of variation in backgrounds.
Extreme case sampling	Purposeful selection of the most unusual cases.
Typical case sampling	Selection of the most typical or average participants.
Confirming and disconfirming sampling	Confirming and disconfirming cases sampling supports checking or challenging emerging trends or patterns in the data.

# Convenience sampling



- In this approach, the potential participants/research settings/materials that are most easily accessible to the researcher are sampled.
- “Because they are there”: people closely surrounding you.
- Its advantages are that it is less expensive and time- and effort-intensive.
- Convenience samples are most appropriate when the priorities are speed and low cost.
- Many reviewers instantly write off convenience samples as lazy and not credible.
- Example, when you simply ask any patient in your clinic who is willing to participate.

# Convenience sampling-When is it used?

- ▶ This is the least desirable sampling method, and researchers should typically avoid using it.
- ▶ More rigorous alternatives include purposeful and other strategic sampling methods.

# Opportunistic (emergent) sampling

- ▶ This sampling method involves the researcher taking advantage of circumstances that occur as the study progresses, taking up emerging opportunities for data collection along the way.
- ▶ This flexible approach lends itself to exploratory field research where little is known about a phenomenon or research setting.

# Opportunistic (emergent) sampling

- ▶ New opportunities to recruit participants or to gain access to a new site may develop after the fieldwork has begun.
- ▶ As the observer gains more knowledge of a setting, he or she can make sampling decisions that take advantage of events, as they unfold.
- ▶ Example
  - ❖ Interviewing homeless people at a shelter, one man tells you where most of the homeless people sleep, so you add this site to where you interview.

# Purposive sampling

---

Purposive or judgement sampling is a frequently-applied conceptually-driven approach.

---

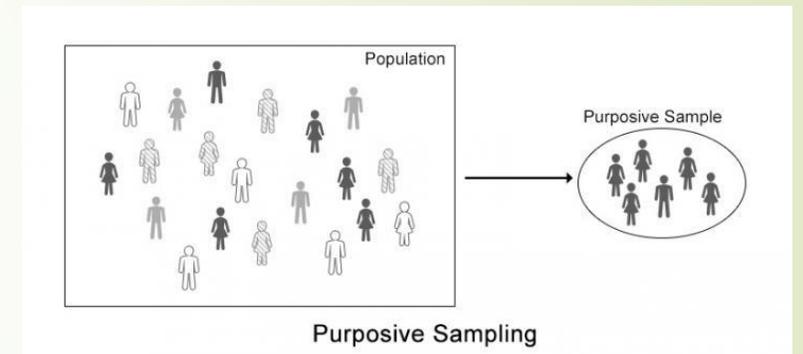
It involves the researcher deliberately and purposefully selecting the sample they believe can be the most fruitful in answering the research question.

---

This selection process can be guided by consideration of the variables or qualities of potential participants that affect the contribution they could provide to the study.

---

These variables may be simple demographics such as age, gender and socioeconomic status but can also include other aspects such as specific attitudes or beliefs.



# Strategies of purposeful sampling

- ❑ There are several different strategies for purposefully selecting information-rich cases.
  - Maximum variation sampling.
  - Homogenous sampling.
  - Deviant sampling.
  - Typical case sampling.
  - Critical case sampling.
  - Confirming and disconfirming sampling.
  - Stratified purposeful sampling.
  - Snowball sampling.

# Maximum variation sampling (Heterogenous sampling)

- ▶ Entails the recruitment of study participants who vary widely on the dimensions of interest with the aim of identifying **central themes/elements** that hold true across the diverse sample.
- ▶ Another definition; researchers access a wide range of data or participants who will represent wide variations of the phenomena under study.
- ▶ This allows for multiple perspectives of individuals to be presented that exemplify the complexity of the world.
- ▶ For small samples a great deal of heterogeneity can be a problem because individual cases are so different from each other. The maximum variation sampling strategy turns that apparent weakness into a strength by applying the following logic: Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program

# How does one maximize variation in a small sample?

- ▶ One begins by identifying diverse characteristics or criteria for constructing the sample.
- ▶ Suppose a statewide program has project sites spread around the state, some in rural areas, some in urban areas, and some in suburban areas. The evaluation lacks sufficient resources to randomly select enough project sites to generalize across the state. The evaluator can at least be sure that the geographical variation among sites is represented in the study.
- ▶ When selecting a small sample of great diversity, the data collection and analysis will yield two kinds of findings:
- ▶ (1) high-quality, detailed descriptions of each case, which are useful for documenting uniqueness, and
- ▶ (2) important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity.

# Maximum variation sampling-Why use this strategy?

- ▶ Often, researchers want to understand how a phenomenon is seen and understood among different people, in different settings and at different times.
- ▶ When using a maximum variation sampling method the researcher selects a small number of units or cases that maximize the diversity relevant to the research question.
- ▶ For example, this strategy was used by Foss and Edson (1989) in their study of women's choices about changing their names after marriage. The authors purposefully recruited three groups of women. Group one included women who adopted their husbands' names; in group two they kept their birth names; in group three they chose new names. To reach these three groups, the authors had to make a concerted effort to recruit women who kept their birth names. They felt the extra effort was worthwhile because their sample variation was necessary for illustrating the complex nature of post-marital naming decisions.

# Homogenous sampling

- In direct contrast to maximum variation sampling is the strategy of picking a small homogeneous sample.
- aims to select a group of cases with similar backgrounds and experiences, simplifying analysis and facilitating group interviewing.
- This sampling approach often is used to select focus groups.

# Homogenous Sampling- Why use this method?

- ▶ Homogeneous sampling is used when the goal of the research is to understand and describe a particular group in depth.

# Deviant case (extreme instance) sampling

- Involves the selection of extreme or outlying cases of the studied phenomenon, such as crises, exceptions or remarkable failures or successes, in an attempt to glean as much information relevant to the research question as possible from each case.
- Learning from highly unusual manifestations of the phenomenon of interest.
- For example, in a study of performance of graduate students, a researcher can select the best and the worse students in class and compare the causes of their performances.
- For example, scholars interested in happiness may choose to interview people who are especially resilient, energetic, and long-living (Lyubomirsky, 2008), and those interested in crisis sensemaking may purposefully examine tragic disasters (Weick, 1993).
- Excellent example of extreme group sampling is Angela Browne's (1987) study, *When Battered Women Kill*. She conducted in-depth studies of the most extreme cases of domestic violence to elucidate the phenomenon of battering and abuse. The extreme nature of the cases presented are what render them so powerful.
- In choosing such samples, researchers can explore the limits of existing theories and potentially develop new concepts.
- Finding (and even knowing what equates with) “extreme” requires first gathering and then sorting through a lot of “typical” data (The process of identifying extreme or deviant cases occurs after some portion of data collection and analysis has been completed).

# Typical case (typical instance) sampling

- ▶ focuses on typical/average cases with the aim of building up a profile of a typical case.
- ▶ The case is specifically selected because it is not in any way atypical , extreme or deviant.
- ▶ General agreement (consensus) on what constitutes a 'typical' case is required for this approach.
- ▶ The researcher should consult several experts in the field of study in order to obtain a consensus as to what example(s) is typical of the phenomenon and should, therefore, be studied.
- ▶ Another option is to use another sampling technique — like maximum variation sampling — to identify typical cases prior to choosing cases for your study (Baran, 2016).

# Typical case (typical instance) sampling

- ▶ let's say you were studying violence in schools. The first step would be to list all of the criteria that define violence for a “typical” school.
- ▶ Then you would choose schools that meet that criteria.
- ▶ You would want to select schools that are “average” (meeting your selected criteria) instead of schools with very high or very low violence rates.

# Typical case (typical instance) sampling- Why use this method?

- ▶ Identifying typical cases can help a researcher identify and understand the key aspects of a phenomenon as they are manifest under ordinary circumstances.
- ▶ Providing a case summary of a typical case can be helpful to those not familiar with a culture or social setting (Helps to give an overview to people with no background).

# Critical case (critical incident sampling) sampling

- ▶ selects cases that will produce critical information with maximum generalisability of information to other cases.
- ▶ The process of selecting a small number of important cases - cases that are likely to "yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (Patton, 2001, p. 236).
- ▶ A good critical case also permits logical deductions in the form: "If this is (not) valid for this case, then it is not valid for any (or only a few) cases" (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 307)
- ▶ Given that the researcher correctly identifies what makes a 'critical case', knowledge gained may be applied to other cases.
- ▶ Examples:
  - ❖ if it happened to so and so then it can happen to anybody, or if so and so passed that exam, then anybody can pass.
  - ❖ You want to know how well people understand a new tax law. Ask very educated people -- if they do not understand it, then probably no one will. Or ask a very uneducated population, if they understand it, most people will.

# Critical case (critical incident sampling) sampling

- ❖ imagine you are a researcher studying the demise of traditional dinnertime rituals. You could purposefully choose a critical sample of families who might be most likely to practice traditional dinnertime rituals (e.g. religious or well-to-do families with children of elementary-school age, a stay-at-home mother). You might find that even these families do not engage in traditional rituals like saying a family prayer before dinner. In choosing this critical case, you might be able to play with the claim that, “if dinnertime rituals are fading even in this critical sample, then such rituals are likely disintegrating among most families.”
- ❖ if conservative group adopts new technology, every other group will.

# Critical case (critical incident sampling) sampling

- ❖ Suppose national policymakers want to get local communities involved in making decisions about how their local program will be run, but they aren't sure that the communities will understand the complex regulations governing their involvement. The first critical case is to evaluate the regulations in a community of well-educated citizens. If they can't understand the regulations, then less-educated people are sure to find the regulations incomprehensible. Or, conversely, one might consider the critical case to be a community consisting of people with quite low levels of education: 'If they can understand the regulations, anyone can.' (Patton 2014: 276).
- In short, choosing a critical sample can help with transferring claims to larger populations in the long run.

# Critical case (critical incident sampling) sampling- Why use this method?

- This is a good method to use when funds are limited. Although sampling for one or more critical cases may not yield findings that are broadly generalizable they may allow researchers to develop logical generalizations from the rich evidence produced when studying a few cases in depth.
- To identify critical cases, the research team needs to be able to identify the dimensions that make a case critical.

# Confirming and disconfirming sampling

- ▶ Usually employed in later phases of data collection. Confirmatory cases are additional examples that fit already emergent patterns to add richness, depth and credibility. Disconfirming cases act as a means for placing boundaries around confirmed findings.
- ▶ involves the selection of a mixture of cases that tie in with expectations or findings up to that point in the study and cases which deviate from them.
- ▶ The confirming cases serve to add depth, detail and enhance credibility while the disconfirming cases challenge the prevalent narrative and may bring to light alternative interpretations.
- ▶ This approach is generally utilised at later stages of a study when preliminary fieldwork has already established what qualifies as a 'confirming case'.

# Stratified purposeful sampling

- ▶ Selects participants from specific sub-groups of the population of interest, enabling easier comparison of the variation across sub-groups.
- ▶ Patton (2001) describes these as samples within samples and suggests that purposeful samples can be stratified or nested by selecting particular units or cases that vary according to a key dimension.
- ▶ The purpose of a stratified purposeful sample is to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis.
- ▶ Each of the strata would constitute a fairly homogeneous sample.
- ▶ This strategy differs from stratified random sampling used in quantitative research in that the sample sizes are likely to be too small for generalization or statistical representativeness.
- ▶ If you want to study university students, pick a certain number of students from each of the 4 years (sample of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors).
- ▶ one may purposefully sample primary care practices and stratify this purposeful sample by practice size (small, medium and large) and practice setting (urban, suburban and rural).

# Snowball sampling (FRIEND OF FRIEND)

- ▶ Can also be called as chain sampling.
- ▶ involves identification of participants by a technique known as 'snowballing' whereby initially identified participants are asked to suggest other possible candidates.
- ▶ Researchers begin by identifying several participants who fit the study's criteria and then ask these people to suggest a colleague, a friend, or a family member.

*Start with a few respondents and then ask them who else might have \_\_\_\_ or know about \_\_\_\_?*

- ▶ Find a few diabetic patients and then ask them who else they know that has diabetes.
- ▶ This is especially useful when the studied population is hard to access, and/or may not publicly signal that they belong to the group of interest (e.g. drug-users).
- ▶ One downside to snowball samples is that they can quickly skew to one type of group or demographic (as participants tend to suggest others who are similar to themselves).
- ▶ A potential solution is to recruit a handful of participants who represent a maximum variation, and then to generate several smaller snowballs from that diverse initial sample.

# Theoretical sampling

- Theoretical sampling is an approach where sampling decisions are guided by the theory that starts to emerge from the collected data.
- The process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop the theory as it emerges" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967)
- The goal of sampling is to collect data that either further develops or challenges existent hypotheses. Initial cases selected have similar characteristics and are studied in depth. The researcher then samples outlying cases to see whether the developing hypothesis 'holds up' to these.
- Once no new insights are derived from further data collection, sampling is ceased. This approach necessitates that data analysis and coding commence while data collection is still ongoing.

# Theoretical sampling

- ▶ In theoretical sampling, the actual number of cases studied is relatively unimportant.
- ▶ What is important is the potential of each case to aid the researcher in developing theoretical insights into the area of social life being studied.
- ▶ After completing interviews with several informants, you consciously vary the type of people interviewed until you have uncovered a broad range of perspectives held by the people in whom you are interested.
- ▶ You would have an idea that you had reached this point when interviews with additional people yield no genuinely new insights.

# SELECTING INFORMANTS

- ▶ Qualitative interviewing calls for a flexible research design.
- ▶ The researcher starts out with a general idea of which people to interview and how to find them, but is willing to change course after the initial interviews.

# SELECTING INFORMANTS

- ▶ Those new to qualitative research usually want to know exactly how many people they need to interview to complete a study. This is a difficult question to answer prior to conducting some research.
- ▶ As Kvale (1996) pointed out: To the common question, “How many interview subjects do I need?” the answer is simply, “Interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know.” (p. 101).
- ▶ The size of the sample in an interviewing study is something that should be determined toward the end of the research and not at the beginning.

# SELECTING INFORMANTS

- ▶ Although qualitative researchers generally cannot determine the sample size prior to conducting a study, people preparing proposals for dissertations or grants are usually expected to specify the number of informants or settings they intend to study.
- ▶ IRBs might also require this. You should be prepared to indicate your sample size in proposals, adding that this might change as you start collecting and analysing data.

# SELECTING INFORMANTS

- ▶ Informants can be found in a number of ways.
- ▶ on pre-fieldwork, one of the easiest ways to build a pool of informants is snowballing—getting to know some informants and having them introduce you to others.
- ▶ A potential drawback of the snowball technique is that it can limit the diversity of your informants (Cannon, Higginbotham, & Leung, 1988).
- ▶ Therefore you need to be prepared to use a range of different approaches to identifying people.
- ▶ You can locate potential informants through the same sources the participant observer uses to gain access to private settings: checking with friends, relatives, and personal contacts; involving yourself with the community of people you want to study; approaching organizations and agencies; advertising in media sources; and announcements through the Internet.

# SELECTING INFORMANTS

- ▶ In the study of families of young children with which Taylor was involved, the researchers used a range of techniques to locate the families, including checking birth records; contacting day care centres, neighbourhood centres, preschools, churches, and social clubs; distributing handouts at local stores; and, in some neighbourhoods, conducting a door-to-door survey (the researchers had identification cards that indicated their affiliation with a university research project).
- ▶ Many researchers now use email and social media to recruit informants. These are convenient modes of communication that are used widely, although some potential informants might not respond to these kinds of contacts

# CONCLUSION

## Sampling for qualitative research

- The aim of the qualitative research is to understand, from within, the subjective reality of the study participants.
- This will not be achieved through superficial knowledge about a large, representative sample of individuals.
- Rather we want to reach people within the study area who can share their unique slice of reality, so that all slices together illustrate the range of variation within the study area.

# CONCLUSION- FLEXIBILITY IN QUALITATIVE SAMPLING

- ▶ A flexible research and sampling design is an important feature of qualitative research,
- ▶ When little is known about a phenomenon or setting, a priori sampling decisions can be difficult. In such circumstances, creating a research design that is flexible enough to foster reflection and preliminary analysis may be a good idea.



**Thank you**