

Sampling in qualitative research (1)

KEY WORDS

- ▶ Generalisability
- ▶ Non-probability
- ▶ Probability
- ▶ Random
- ▶ Representativeness
- ▶ Sample

In previous papers in this miniseries we looked at the methods used to sample for the various approaches to quantitative research. We saw that quantitative research seeks to identify people for samples who represent the population of interest and that sampling is usually homogenous since these types of studies seek findings which are generalisable. In this paper we will look at the methods used to generate samples for qualitative research. The means of sampling for qualitative research are not like those used in quantitative research since the aims of the two research paradigms are dissimilar. Qualitative studies seek to understand people's experiences of a phenomenon and seek only to be representative in their outputs.

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Before considering the approaches to sampling in the qualitative methodologies, it is worth considering the nature of qualitative research and what kinds of questions it seeks to answer as well as a little about the methods used in data collection.

Qualitative research sets out to answer questions which relate to the ways in which people experience and interpret the world and what happens to and around them (Ellis, 2014). An example of a qualitative research study might be to understand a person's lived experience of the management of a traumatic wound; which is a vastly different study from one comparing the speed of wound healing using two different dressing regimes. We cannot measure or quantify the experience as we can the rate of healing, in the same way attempting to capture the lived experience of the rate of healing would not really make sense nor usefully inform developments in practice. The sorts of questions qualitative research answers include those like: 'What do I feel about the care I have received?' or 'What is it like to undergo this particular dressing regimen?'. These questions related to people's perceptions of the quality of care rather than its quantity and are about their experiences, understandings and beliefs.

Notably no two people will experience a phenomenon or event in exactly the same way, nor will they place the same interpretation on

their experiences. What qualitative research does is to try to capture something of what it is like to be someone, experience or observe something. This is an important issue when sampling and considering the purpose of qualitative studies that is in essence to produce findings which are representative—which we will discuss later.

SAMPLING IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In the previous papers in this series we saw it does not make sense to study the whole of population in order to understand the answer to a question (Ellis, 2020). For example it would not make sense to study the effectiveness of a new dressing for everyone with venous leg ulcers in the UK, rather it makes sense to study the effect on a carefully chosen subset, a sample, of such people. Much quantitative research however seeks to be generalisable. The purpose of quantitative research is to provide answers to questions and then consider 'how confidently we can extend the results from a sample to the population from which the sample was drawn' (Murad et al, 2018).

In principle this means sampling for quantitative research needs to be undertaken in a considered way such that we, as health professionals, can be confident that the findings of the research can be used to help us make decisions about the care of the patients in front of us. Thus generalisability is the essence of evidence based practice in the medical or technical sense.

Qualitative research does not place upon itself the same level of burden of proof as quantitative research in that it does not seek to find answers which are generalisable—we don't need to know everyone will experience a new wound dressing regime in the same way after all. Qualitative research rather seeks to show findings which are representative of the population under study; that is to say they give a good flavour of what people think, feel or experience, but that these findings may not extrapolate directly to the wider population of people who have had the same experience. This is an important distinction and makes sense of the human condition which suggests experience is a very personal issue.

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In this sense the intent of sampling in the qualitative methodologies is to find people who have had experience of the issues of interest, let's say recovery from a traumatic injury, so their experience can be understood. People are therefore selected to be involved in the research because they meet the purpose of the research, nothing more and nothing less. It is because people are selected to meet the purpose of the study in this way that the sample method used is said to be purposive (also known as purposeful or selective sampling) (Ellis, 2019). The way in which purposive sampling works will depend on the nature of the question being asked; for example if the question is about understanding the usual turn of events the sample will be quite homogenous (e.g. selecting many people who have had similar experiences recovering from traumatic injury), if the question concerns the experiences of peoples whose experiences are unusual it may be more heterogeneous (e.g. understanding the experience of wound healing for people in a variety of settings) (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Choosing participants for qualitative research who fit the purpose of the research is quite unlike quantitative probability sampling, in which all people in the population of interest have an equal chance of being involved in the study, improving generalisability (Quatember, 2019). Quite often the approach to identifying and approaching the qualitative sample is to approach people known to the researchers, e.g. people attending a particular clinic or who are on an individual's case load. Such an approach to sampling is called convenience sampling.

Convenience sampling sounds as if it is a lazy approach to finding people for a study, this is not the case. Convenience sampling is a practical approach to identifying participants for research which seeks to answer a question in a manner which is representative and not generalisable. If you want to understand the experience of wound healing it is both practical and convenient to select people from a wound care clinic.

Convenience samples do however suffer with a major potential ethical drawback in that by targeting

people often known to the researchers, they can, if not handled sensitively and ethically be accused of being coercive – that is placing undue pressure on people to participate because they do not want to upset the health care professional who is also providing their care.

Purposive and convenience samples are pretty much common approaches to sampling in the qualitative paradigm although the means by which the approaches to samples are made and the size of the sample differ quite widely between the methodologies. In the next paper in this series we will examine the ways in which people might be identified and sample sizes might be derived for qualitative research studies with reference to some of the qualitative methodologies.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have identified the general approach to selecting a study sample for qualitative research methodologies. In doing so we have seen the nature and purpose of qualitative research is such that it seeks to understand an experience or phenomenon from the point of view of the people involved and in so doing represent these findings to the research audience; they seek to be representative.

We have identified that as a rule, people are selected for qualitative research because they meet the purpose of the research in that they have experience of whatever it is the researchers are seeking to understand; that is to say the samples are purposive. We have further seen that the pragmatic approach to such sampling is to sample from people who are easily identified and approached, that is they are convenient. Such purposive and convenient samples meet the brief of qualitative research in that they are representative of the general experience of the issue under investigation but not necessarily of the wider population of people experiencing the phenomenon of interest. In the next paper in this series we will explore how people are identified and approached for qualitative samples as well as how sample sizes might be derived according to the methodology being employed.



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