

Sampling in qualitative research (3)

KEY WORDS

- ▶ Biographic research
- ▶ Case study
- ▶ Ethnography
- ▶ Gatekeeper
- ▶ Qualitative
- ▶ Sampling

In the last paper in this series (Ellis, 2020), we considered how qualitative researchers might determine how they gain a sample for their research, as well as considering the size of the sample they use, with a special emphasis on phenomenological and grounded theory research.

We determined how sampling methods in qualitative research are often not precisely defined and may require a degree of discretion, and the application of experience and expertise, on the part of the researcher. We saw also how some research uses data saturation as the point at which to stop recruitment.

In this paper we will continue to explore the sampling methods within qualitative research by considering sampling in ethnographic and case study/biographic research. We will also consider issues of how subjects for research are identified and approached.

Sampling in ethnography

Ethnography is unique among the qualitative methodologies in that it requires a long-term commitment and for the researcher to embed within the social system being studied. Ethnography essentially seeks to describe, and interpret to some extent, the activities of a social system like a ward, surgery or clinic (Ellis, 2015) and more importantly the people who operate within that system, the group of interest. It seeks to do this from the inside gaining insight into the cultural norms and behaviours of the group, this is called the emic view — that is a view of the world taken from perspective of the people within the group (Polit and Beck, 2014).

The embedding of the researcher in the group makes the sample frame more challenging than in other research methods, especially as the researcher must become one of the group to gain the inside view — something called participant observation (Ellis, 2019).

Sampling in ethnographic research is more a

matter of gaining access to the group, than it is the classic qualitative method of getting to interview members of a group following an episode of explanation and consent. In this respect, gaining access is a matter of either undertaking the research among a group of which the researcher is already a member or gaining access through a group member, someone in this respect termed a gatekeeper. The observational sampling consists of what the researcher observe during their time in the group.

The gatekeeper introduces the researcher to the group and may even help them integrate. After this point it is down to the researcher as to how they behave, keeping themselves on the fringes of the group and trying to understand what is going on or fully integrating into the group and acting like one of them to fully experience the culture they are seeking to understand.

Ethnographers don't only use observation to gather their data, they also use interviews, the sampling for these is usually serendipitous, that is the researcher either interviews people on the basis that they know they are collecting data and so is not explicit, or they ask potential participants permission as they meet during their observations. Galazka (2019), for example, used both observations and interviews in her study to explore the relationships between patients and wound care clinicians.

In some circumstances people interested in undertaking an ethnography, will do so where they already work. This means that access is already established and so the sampling is less problematic from an observation point of view. Gaining access for interviews would require a different approach with colleagues being approached individually

and consents re-established; although other conversations may form part of the study and as such consent may not be re-obtained.

One of the clear sampling issues with this form of research, be it in the workplace or elsewhere relate to the ethics of consent. Obviously, it is hard to gain consent from a whole organisation and conversely as an individual working in a team, it is hard to without consent individually — especially where it comes to be observed.

Sampling in case study and biographical research

Case study research may include one or more individuals who are studied over time. The information for this type of research is collected through interviews, observations and accessing other sources such as written records or film (Creswell and Poth, 2017). One needs to see past the term case here, which many regard as relating to one person and consider case as existing in a wider context which may also include a group of people who have had a similar experience or perhaps episode of care.

In contrast biographic research relates to gaining an insight into the life story of an individual and perhaps is better thought of as a way of capturing data about a life (Creswell and Poth, 2017) or a life's experience, as opposed to a case study which pertains to an event or series of event. Clearly sampling for biographic research requires identifying an individual or some individuals, who have the life experience of interest and so is purposive, and spending considerable time gathering information to inform the creation of a narrative about their experiences. Whiffin et al (2019), for example, undertook a biographical study to understand the impact on people lives, biographies, when a family member suffers a traumatic brain injury.

Sampling for case study research is purposive, that is, like much qualitative research, people are selected to be involved in the case study research because they meet the criterion of having had the experience being researched or live within the group or work

within the system of interest. People in such samples may include those whose experiences are different from the norm, what Creswell and Poth (2017) call 'unusual cases'. Selecting people with unusual experience increase the scope of a case study and may make it more representative. Bazaliński et al (2018) described the care of an individual with an uncommon presentation of an infected leg ulcer in a case study — this represents a case study using an 'unusual case' — some learning which would be lost if it were not described in this way.

Gaining access

As well as considering the individual nuance of sampling within each of the qualitative methodologies, researchers often need to consider exactly how they will approach getting access a sample in the first place.

We should remember here that qualitative research uses non-probability sampling, where the probability of being included in a sample is not the same for all individuals who share a particular characteristic. This is the opposite of probability sampling in quantitative research, which seeks to ensure that everyone in the sample frame has an equal chance of be sampled in the hope of improving generalisability (that is applicability of the findings to the wider population (Ellis, 2019)). Sampling for qualitative research, which seeks to be representative (finding which may be broadly comparable with similar people (Polit and Beck, 2014)) rather than generalisable, is more about the act of getting access that is simple and meets the needs of the research — that is convenient and purposive.

We previously mentioned the role of the gatekeeper in getting access to a study site for ethnographic research. We identified how gatekeepers both introduce and enable the researcher to integrate within the group. In fact, the role of gatekeepers can be much more than this as in many cases the gatekeeper not only introduces the researcher, but they also provide them with the permission to gain access in the first place (Andoh-Arthur, 2019). Gatekeepers may allow access to

convenient samples, say of people attending a wound care clinic, which might also be a purposive and convenient sample and for which ethical approval must be sought.

One of the other frequently used approaches to gaining access is through a method called snowball sampling in which the researcher identifies early participants and uses their contact to recruit more people to the study and so on – hence snowballing. The issue with snowball samples is that they have the potential to be very restricted as they rely on individual networks (Polit and Beck, 2014).

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the approaches to sampling in ethnographic, case, and biographical research. It has shown that ethnographic sampling is problematic from an ethical point of view and the ethnographer needs to think hard about the issues of consent when observing people in their day to day lives. It has shown how case study researchers need to sample people who meet the criteria for the study they are undertaking, which may prove hard if the issue under investigation is rare. It has also discussed how biographical research also uses purposive e sampling to gain an inside view of an issue of interest.

It has discussed some of the strategies for

approaching people and groups which qualitative researcher might adopt to gain access to the samples they need for their research. It has shown how gatekeepers might facilitate access to groups of interest and how snowballing, although restrictive in some senses, will enable researchers to identify and approach individuals of interest. **WUK**

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