



LIHS Mini Master Class

© Alexandru Nicusor Matei 2013 CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Sampling in Qualitative Research. How many interviews is enough?

Dr Cathy Brennan

For Clip Art * Images courtesy of Microsoft Clip Art

Cathy Brennan © University of Leeds 2016. This work is made available for reuse under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) Licence.



What is qualitative research?

- Interested in the *why* and *how*
- Sensitive to the richness and variability of the subject matter
- Aims to produce an in-depth understanding

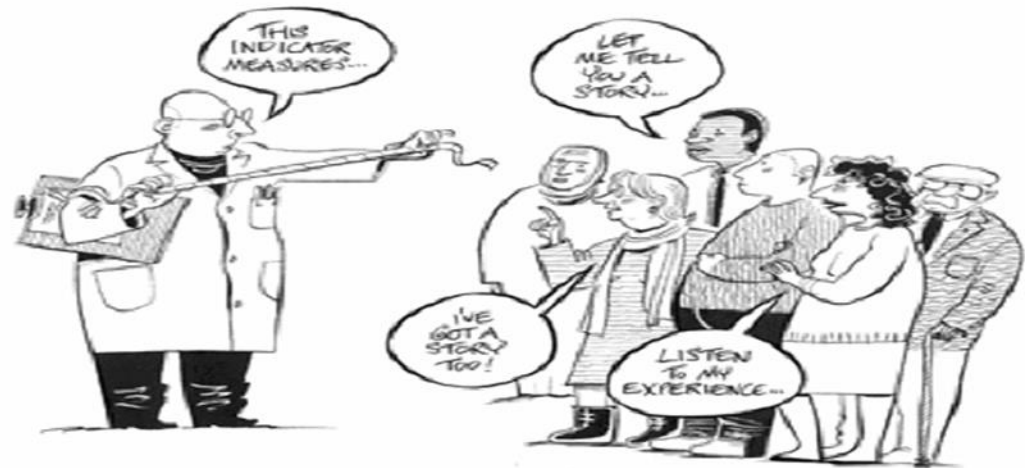


What type of sample?

- Guided by research question and methods
- Aiming for a closeness to the subject matter
- Not interested in an 'on-average' viewpoint
- Not a probability sample
- More is not necessarily better

Types of sample

- Convenience
- Snowball
- Purposive
- Theoretical



Purposive sampling

- Subjects selected on basis of pre-defined criteria
- Select information-rich subjects guided by research aims
 - Maximum variation
 - Critical cases
 - Criterion
- Uses a sampling frame

Theoretical Sampling

- Glaser & Strauss (1967) in grounded theory
- Qualitative research as an iterative process
- Sampling guided by emerging theory
- Select cases to explore categories and their relationships

Sampling in Qualitative Research

What size of sample?

- “It depends” (Baker & Edwards, 2012)
- Guided by research question and methods
- Interested in depth not numbers
- Single case study to multiple interviews



How many interviews is enough?

- Depends on methodology
- Depends on research question
- Depends on context
- No set guidelines – advice can vary from 5 to 35 to 100!
- Too few and you may lack adequate depth/breadth
- Too many and may have superficial or unwieldy volumes of data

How many interviews is enough?

An iterative process:

- Data saturation
- Informational Redundancy

No new concepts/themes/ideas are occurring in subsequent interviews



How many interviews is enough?

Guest et al.(2006) suggest saturation achieved at 12 interviews

But beware:

- Narrow sampling frame
- Analytic perspective limited
- Interviews not giving rich information (not getting below the surface)

Further Information

References

- Baker, S. & Edwards, R. (2012). How many qualitative interviews is enough? Expert voices and early career reflections on sampling and cases in qualitative research. National Centre for Research Methods discussion paper <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/>
- GLASER, B. G. & STRAUSS, A. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*, Hawthorne, NY, Aldine publishing company.
- GREENHALGH, T. & TAYLOR, R. (1997) Papers that go beyond numbers (qualitative research). *BMJ*, 315, 740-3.
- GUEST, G., BUNCE, A. & JOHNSON, L. (2006) How Many Interviews are Enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18, 59-82.