

FAQ 9: How do we sample children for qualitative research?

What's the issue?

Sampling for qualitative research is essentially different from sampling for quantitative research. When sampling for quantitative research, researchers usually have in mind the representativeness of the sample, to be able to make generalizations about the population. In qualitative research, the aim, however, is not generalizing, but explaining the phenomena as comprehensively as possible – from the viewpoint of the social actors involved in the phenomenon under study – focusing on specific meanings and practices. It is not the purpose of the qualitative study to determine how typical a phenomenon is for the population. Researchers do not usually want to make inferences beyond their sample.

Common practice

- Children for focus groups or interviews, and sites for observation, are sampled through a theoretical sampling that is based on researchers' decisions about what characteristics are important for the sample according to the research questions.
- Researchers can draw a sample from a quantitative sample by asking children at the end of survey whether they are willing to participate in focus groups or interviews as well.
- If researchers only do qualitative research, they can sample children at schools, through their own or their children's social network, or through parents if dealing with younger children. Schools and homes are suitable places for recruiting children because they also provide contexts for the interview/focus groups.
- Whether doing online or offline qualitative research about peculiar or specific topics (e.g. focus groups with young IT experts), it is easier to sample at web discussion forums focused around that particular topic. This way, it is easier to sample from specific populations that are difficult to "recognize on the street". Another place for recruiting interviewees and focus group participants is represented by social network sites.
- Try to be as specific as possible about the sample of children to be included in the qualitative study because that allows you to be more exploratory.
- For conducting focus groups with a broader age range (e.g. 8–18), invite children of similar ages (e.g. 8–9, 10–11, 12–13, etc.) to be in the same groups.
- When researching sensitive topics, such as online risky experiences, or gendered practices, evaluate separating boys and girls.
- The size of a sample for qualitative interviews is good enough if ranging from 20–40 (if you need to compare findings, you can double it). When dealing with a very specific group of children, the sample can be even smaller. Anything beyond 50 can only mean putting in extra effort, which can be better used to be much more careful about the consistency of interpretation and analysis.

Pitfalls to avoid

One common pitfall is insisting on representativeness when sampling for qualitative research. No matter how accurately you sample to ensure a representative sample, your efforts will not pay off in qualitative research.

Researchers will never be able to do a big enough number of qualitative interviews or focus groups to ensure a sample large enough for generalizations, which they are not aiming for in the first place. Always try to bear in mind that you are not aiming for generalizations. Researchers are not trying to tell how many people think that, but why they think as they do, and what the reasons are behind that thinking. The qualitative part of a study can always be followed up by a quantitative survey to test for generalizations.

Questions to consider

How many qualitative interviews are really needed? How long should the observation of a specific site (e.g. a school yard) take? How many focus groups are needed, considering that a series of them are needed if that is the main method of data collection? Based on which criteria will the focus groups be divided?

A researcher's experience

In a qualitative research project investigating, through interviews and observations, why only some middle-class households adopted cable television, our research team contracted a recruitment company to locate 10 households with, and 10 households without, cable. We stipulated that the households should be from the London area for, though less than ideal, it was convenient for the research team since the project timeline was short. Mistakenly, as it turned out, we assumed that the agency had a database from which to draw a sample from all over London. Instead, we received a sample entirely based in Potters Bar, a small town just north of London, where a large proportion of residents commute into London each day. Worse still, we discovered later that one recruiter had gone from door to door in a particular part of Potters Bar, while the other had approached people shopping on a Saturday morning, both thus producing rather homogenous samples. The lesson to learn is to ask the recruitment agency how they work, to specify in the contract that the sample should, as much as possible, reflect the diversity in the population sampled and, if concerns remain, to check with the interviewees themselves just how they were recruited. (Leslie Haddon, UK)

References and further resources

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