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Selecting a Case

I concluded the previous chapter with my favourite research maxim: 'make a lot out of a little'. If you take me seriously, you will have every chance of producing a thorough, analytically interesting research study. However, a nagging doubt may well remain.

This doubt surfaces in a regular refrain I hear from student researchers. 'I have so few data, only just one case,' they say, 'how can I possibly generalize about it?'

Generalizability is a standard aim in quantitative research and is normally achieved by statistical sampling procedures. Such sampling has two functions. First, it allows you to feel confident about the representativeness of your sample: 'if the population characteristics are known, the degree of representativeness of a sample can be checked' (Arber, 1993: 70). Second, such representativeness allows you to make broader inferences:

The purpose of sampling is usually to study a representative subsection of a precisely defined population in order to make inferences about the whole population. (1993: 38)

Such sampling procedures are, however, usually unavailable in qualitative research. In such studies, our data are often derived from one or more cases and it is unlikely that these cases will have been selected on a random basis. Very often a case will be chosen simply because it allows access. Moreover, even if you were able to construct a representative sample of cases, the sample size would be likely to be so large as to preclude the kind of intensive analysis usually preferred in qualitative research (Mason, 1996: 91).

This gives rise to a problem, familiar to users of quantitative methods:

How do we know . . . how representative case study findings are of all members of the population from which the case was selected? (Bryman, 1988: 88)

GENERALIZABILITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

For a few writers who see qualitative research as purely descriptive, generalizability is not an issue. For example, Stake refers to the 'intrinsic case study' where 'this case is of interest . . . in all its particularity and ordinariness'

(1994: 236). In the intrinsic case study, according to Stake, no attempt is made to generalize beyond the single case or even to build theories.

This is resisted by many qualitative researchers. As Jennifer Mason puts it:

I do not think qualitative researchers should be satisfied with producing explanations which are idiosyncratic or particular to the limited empirical parameters of their study . . . Qualitative research should [therefore] produce explanations which are *generalizable* in some way, or which have a wider resonance. (1996: 6)

So, unlike Stake, the problem of 'representativeness' is a perennial worry of many qualitative or case study researchers. How do they attempt to address it? Can we generalize from cases to populations without following a purely statistical logic?

In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss four different but positive answers to this question of how we can obtain generalizability:

- combining qualitative research with quantitative measures of populations
- purposive sampling guided by time and resources
- theoretical sampling
- using an analytic model which assumes that generalizability is present in the existence of *any* case.

COMBINING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH QUANTITATIVE MEASURES OF POPULATIONS

Quantitative measures may sometimes be used to infer from one case to a larger population. Hammersley (1992) suggests three methods through which we can attempt to generalize from the analysis of a single case:

- obtaining information about relevant aspects of the population of cases and comparing our case with them
- using survey research on a random sample of cases
- co-ordinating several ethnographic studies.

Hammersley argues that such comparisons with a larger sample may allow us to establish some sense of the representativeness of our single case.

However, two of Hammersley's methods are very ambitious for the student researcher. For instance, you are unlikely to have the funds for even a small piece of survey research, while the co-ordination of several ethnographic studies requires substantial resources of time and personnel as well as good contacts with other researchers. Such contacts allowed Miller and Silverman (1995) to apply the comparative approach in describing talk about troubles in two counselling settings: a British haemophilia centre counselling patients who are HIV-positive, and a family therapy centre in the US. In this study, we focused on similarities in three types of discursive practices in

these settings: those concerned with trouble definitions, trouble remedies, and the social contexts of the clients' troubles (see also Gubrium, 1992).

Without such contacts and resources, the student researcher is left with Hammersley's first method: obtaining information about relevant aspects of the population of cases and comparing our case with them. This is more useful because, at its simplest, this method only involves reading about other cognate studies and comparing our case with them. For instance, in my study of HIV counselling (Silverman, 1997b), I compared my counsellor-client interviews with Heritage and Sefi's (1992) data on interviews between health visitors and first-time mothers. Although this had little to do with establishing the representativeness of my sample, it gave a firmer basis to my generalizations about advice sequences in my data (1997b: 124-8).

The comparative method used here allows you to make larger claims about your analysis without leaving your library. As Peräkylä puts it:

The comparative approach directly tackles the question of generalizability by demonstrating the similarities and differences across a number of settings. (1997: 214)

In this sense, your literature review (see Chapter 18) has as much to do with the issue of generalizability as with displaying your academic credentials.

PURPOSIVE SAMPLING

Before we can contemplate comparing our case with others, we need to have selected our case. Are there any grounds other than convenience or accessibility to guide us in this selection?

Purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested. However, this does not provide a simple approval to any case we happen to choose. Rather purposive sampling demands that we think critically about the parameters of the population we are interested in and choose our sample case carefully on this basis. As Denzin and Lincoln put it:

Many qualitative researchers employ ... purposive, and not random, sampling methods. They seek out groups, settings and individuals where ... the processes being studied are most likely to occur. (1994: 202)

Stake (1994: 243) gives the example of a study of interactive displays in children's museums. He assumes that you only have resources to study four such museums. How should you proceed?

He suggests setting up a *typology* which would establish a matrix of museum types as in Table 8.1. The typology yields six cases which could be increased further by, say, distinguishing between museums located in small and big cities - bringing up the cases to twelve. Which cases should you select?

TABLE 8.1 A typology of children's museums

Programme type	Type of museum		
	Art	Science	History
Exhibitory	1	2	3
Participative	4	5	6

Source: adapted from Stake, 1994: 243

You will be constrained by two main factors. First, there may not be examples to fit every cell. Second, your resources will not allow you to research every existing unit. So you have to make a practical decision. For instance, if you can cover only two cases, do you choose two participatory museums in different locations or in different subjects? Or do you compare such a museum with a more conventional exhibit-based museum?

Provided you have thought through the options, it is unlikely that your selection will be criticized. Moreover, as we see below, how you set up your typology and make your choice should be grounded in the theoretical apparatus you are using. Sampling in qualitative research is neither statistical nor purely personal: it is, or should be, theoretically grounded. To improve your understanding of this point, you could now attempt Exercise 8.1.

THEORETICAL SAMPLING

Theoretical and purposive sampling are often treated as synonyms. Indeed, the only difference between the two procedures applies when the 'purpose' behind 'purposive' sampling is not theoretically defined.

Bryman argues that qualitative research follows a theoretical, rather than a statistical, logic: 'the issue should be couched in terms of the generalizability of cases to *theoretical* propositions rather than to *populations* or *universes*' (1988: 90, my emphasis).¹

The nature of this link between sampling and theory is set out by Jennifer Mason:

theoretical sampling means selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position ... and most importantly the explanation or account which you are developing. Theoretical sampling is concerned with constructing a sample ... which is meaningful theoretically, because it builds in certain characteristics or criteria which help to develop and test your theory and explanation. (1996: 93-4)

Theoretical sampling has three features which I discuss below:

- choosing cases in terms of your theory
- choosing 'deviant' cases
- changing the size of your sample during the research.

Choosing cases in terms of your theory

Mason writes about 'the wider universe of social explanations in relation to which you have constructed your research questions' (1996: 85). This theoretically defined universe 'will make some sampling choices more sensible and meaningful than others'. Mason describes choosing a kind of sample which can represent a wider population. Here we select a sample of particular 'processes, types, categories or examples which are relevant to or appear within the wider universe' (1996: 92). Mason suggests that examples of these would include single units such as 'an organization, a location, a document ... [or] a conversation'.

Mason gives the example of a DA study of gender relation as discourses which construct subjects of gender relations. In this approach, as she puts it: 'you are ... unlikely to perceive the social world in terms of a large set of gender relations from which you can simply draw a representative sample of people by gender' (1996: 85).

So in qualitative research the relevant or 'sampleable' units are often seen as theoretically defined. This means that it is inappropriate to sample populations by such attributes as 'gender', 'ethnicity' or even age because how such attributes are routinely defined is itself the *topic* of your research.

As an example of theoretically defined sampling, Bryman uses Glaser and Strauss's discussion of 'awareness contexts' in relation to dying in hospital:

The issue of whether the particular hospital studied is 'typical' is not the critical issue; what is important is whether the experiences of dying patients are typical of the broad class of phenomena ... to which the theory refers. Subsequent research would then focus on the validity of the proposition in other milieux (e.g. doctors' surgeries). (1988: 91)

We can understand better the theoretical logic behind choice of a sample in a further example of a study of police work. Say you are interested in the arrest and booking of suspects (see Miles and Huberman, 1984: 37-8). You are now confronted with a series of choices which relate to:

- the particular setting to be studied
- the elements or processes on which you will focus
- how you might generalize further.

Let us look at each of these in turn.

SETTINGS

In independent, unfunded research, you are likely to choose any setting which, while demonstrating the phenomenon in which you are interested, is accessible and will provide appropriate data reasonably readily and quickly. In the police study, this might well lead you to study the police station rather than a squad car, the scene of the crime, the suspect's residence or hangout. In the police station, at the very least, you will keep warm and dry, you will

be safe and you can expect several arrests and bookings on any visit. However, so far you are being guided by quite practical influences.

THE RESEARCH FOCUS

In focusing your research, you necessarily are making a theoretically guided choice. By opting to focus on particular individuals, events or processes, you are electing particular theoretical frameworks. For instance, a focus on differential behaviour between police officers and suspects with different characteristics may draw on some version of the structural determinants of action. Conversely, a focus on how laws are interpreted in practice (cf. Sudnow, 1968b), may derive from a concern with the creative power of common-sense interpretive procedures.

GENERALIZING FURTHER

When your study is wedded to other studies which share your theoretical orientation, a single police station may provide enough data to develop all the generalizations you want about, say, how common-sense reasoning works. However, if you have a more 'structural' bent, it may now be necessary to widen your sample in two ways: first, to add more observations of arrests in this police station; and second, to compare it with other stations, perhaps in a range of areas.

In all these cases, the sample is not random but theoretical: it is

designed to provide a close-up, detailed or meticulous view of particular units which may constitute ... cases which are relevant to or appear within the wider universe. (Mason, 1996: 92)

Choosing 'deviant' cases

Mason notes that you must overcome any tendency to select a case which is likely to support your argument. Instead, it makes sense to seek out negative instances as defined by the theory with which you are working.

For instance, in a study of the forces that may make trade unions undemocratic, Lipset et al. (1962) deliberately chose to study a US printing union. Because this union had unusually strong democratic institutions it constituted a vital deviant case compared with most American unions of the period. Lipset's union was also deviant in terms of a highly respected theory which postulated an irresistible tendency towards 'oligarchy' in all formal organizations.

So Lipset et al. chose a deviant case because it offered a crucial test of a theory. As our understanding of social processes improves, we are increasingly able to choose cases on such theoretical grounds.

Changing the size of your sample during the research

So far we have been discussing theoretical sampling as an issue at the *start* of a research study. However, we can also apply such sampling during the