Annals of Tourism Research 104 (2024) 103711

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: https://www.journals.elsevier.com/annals-of-tourism-research

Research note

Sampling in qualitative interview research: criteria, considerations and guidelines for success

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 7 September 2023
Received in revised form 19 December 2023
Accepted 20 December 2023
Available online 5 January 2024

Handling editor: Donna Chambers

Keywords:
Interview samples
Sampling strategy
Sampling size
Qualitative research
Sampling criteria

Introduction

Considerations of sampling are fundamental to any empirical study. However, in studies based on qualitative research interviews, sampling issues are rarely discussed. Possible reasons include a lack of universal 'rules of thumb' governing sampling considerations and the diversity of approaches to qualitative inquiry. Some misconceptions lead to poor practices and higher likelihood of rejection. The purpose of this research note is to articulate why sampling considerations are particularly important in tourism research from the methodological rigor perspective and discuss matters relating to sample size and strategies to help improve best practice in research reporting.

Why is a consideration of sampling important in qualitative research interviews?

Detailed sampling information is necessary for a number of reasons. Firstly, to address the *crisis of representation* issue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This relates to debates about intersubjectivity in the context of, for example, authenticity in lived experiences in tourism (Ning, 1999). In order for a researcher to make claims about the 'reality' of another person's experience, consideration of "cognitive access" must be demonstrated by showing how an atmosphere of trust between the researcher and the research

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103711

participants was achieved (e.g. Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). Secondly, providing detailed information about the sample adds context and enriches the story being told, lending credibility to data interpretation. Additionally, this information reconciles ethical and methodological integrity, therefore it is crucial to include details of sample selection (including limitations) and how they could influence the findings.

In qualitative interview samples in tourism, researcher reflexivity on sample selection and characteristics is crucial (Ateljevic, Harris, Wilson, & Collins, 2005). Thus, considerations of the interviewer's positionality in relation with research participants become an important aspect of the study, which can shape and contextualise the outcomes. In tourism studies, relationships and interactions are intrinsic to the research context, often at an inter-cultural level (e.g. visitors, local community, researcher). Researchers must therefore reflect on:

- how their characteristics (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity or race) may have influenced the course of the research process, including sample selection (e.g. access to participants) and research findings;
- how the research may affect the participants, relations with them, the environment, politics, as well as the researchers themselves.

For example, in an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis aimed at understanding experiences in dystopic places, Farkic (2020) reflects on her relationships with only one research participant. She indicates their prior relationship, including shared hobbies enabling intersubjective observations and interpretations of his experiences while visiting Chernobyl. Ryan and Martin's (2001) study of striptease tourism not only describes how they managed to gain access to the women they observed and interviewed/conversed with, but also point out that their study "became catalytic" and during it a friendship developed between the researcher and some of the participants, which led to changes in the research outcomes as well as the life-trajectories of the women.

Moreover, due to the specificity of tourism, various types of differences routinely arise, thus intersubjectivity, unequal power relations, spatiality and temporality of research experiences are always present and can influence the research outcomes. Thus, sampling considerations require reflexivity due to ethical reasons which have become increasingly important for research agencies and publishers of prestigious journals, including Annals.

In Fig. 1 we present possible approaches to selecting sampling strategy and size, which emerge from an iterative process of data collection and analysis depending on research aim/questions, and context, the characteristics of the participants/researchers and ethical issues.

Sample size

What the sample size should be is a critical question, as Anderson notes "size does matter", but "more is not always better" (2017, p. 4). In general, sample size should not be too large so that richness/depth of analysis is undermined, nor too small to

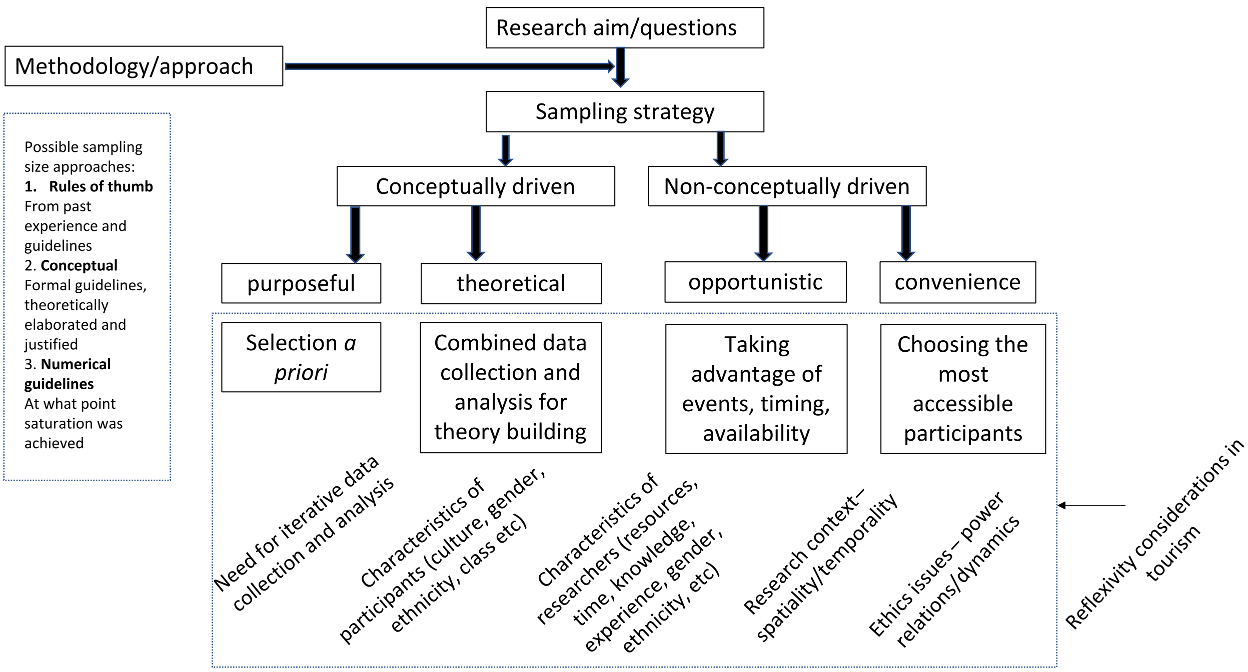

Fig. 1. Sampling considerations/strategies.

undermine the credibility of the analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). The most important criterion is one of *adequacy* of sample size which is always relative and must be justified in the reporting. It must be linked to the research purpose, rather than an absolute or definitive number per se. Small samples can be useful in generating theoretical or hermeneutic insights, theory-testing or construct-problematising, demonstration of possibility, illustration of best practice and theory-exemplification (Robinson, 2014). Usually they serve to develop idiographic descriptions to better understand the participants, evoke empathy, present uniqueness of human action, etc. (e.g. Farkic, 2020).

A lack of overarching a priori criteria to determine minimum sample size requires researchers to emphasise the factors they considered in deciding when to stop data collection.

Different approaches are possible (see Fig. 1): rules of thumb, conceptual approaches, numerical guidelines or combinations thereof. However, for qualitative interviews, questions determining sample size are primarily related to the philosophical (ontological and/or epistemological) assumptions and alignment of approach taken to the data analysis (Sim, Saunders, Waterfield, & Kingstone, 2018).

For rules of thumb, setting an ideal minimum number of research participants could be based on either/both methodological considerations and past experience. However, even where literature makes numerical recommendations these differ significantly across contexts. For example, studies taking an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis approach often are based on relatively small and homogenous sample, due to the depth of analysis into the experiences and/or emotional states of participants about specific contexts (Malone, McCabe, & Smith, 2014). Thematic Analysis may require larger samples, depending on the nature of the question, its focus and whether either are determined by the type of population. Generally, where a more general question on a large population is undertaken through qualitative interviewing, applying Thematic Analysis techniques, a larger sample is required to generate convincing and credible analysis (e.g. Wang, Blasco, Hamzah, & Verschuuren, 2023).

Regarding conceptual approaches, it is believed that the sample size depends on the aims of the research, participants' characteristics, use of established theory, quality of dialogue and analysis strategy. Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016, p. 1) claim that “the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower amount of participants is needed”. They call this “information power”. Thus, the more narrow the aim, the greater the specificity of participants, the more developed the theory, the stronger the interview dialogue and the quality of the analysis, the smaller research sample will be needed because the information power will be greater.

According to numerical guidelines, saturation occurs after a certain number of interviews are undertaken. However, this is often problematic, since it is not possible to estimate in advance the number of themes that will emerge from the research undertaken in an iterative process of data collection and analysis. It is often incorrectly assumed that “themes” are independent of the participants' social context, experience or knowledge, etc. and that other informants would not yield new information. This assumes that themes emerge in a linear manner and do not alter *through* the process. This is, however, not the case because qualitative analysis involves a generative coding process, which is subsequently revised and refined and where the meaning of themes also change (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Thus, issues concerning adequacy of sample size require a process of ongoing reflection and revision, which must be recounted in the reporting and a paper/project writing up phase. It is an iterative, context-dependent decision made during the *analytical* phase of the research process as the researcher begins to develop an increasingly comprehensive picture of the themes and relationships between them.

Sample strategies

Various sampling strategies are available to qualitative researchers, which should also be acknowledged in the research report or manuscript. However, there are conflicting classifications in the literature (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In general, however, there are two non-conceptually driven (i.e., no specific emphasis or guiding principles) approaches: opportunistic and convenience sampling; and two conceptually-driven approaches: purposive and theoretical sampling (Fig. 1).

Opportunistic sampling is used as a flexible approach in exploratory research when little is known about the issue or experiences under study. Researchers reflect on how the research process continues and make decisions about the sample on an ongoing basis.

A convenience sampling approach on the other hand is about choosing the most accessible participants. It is the most parsimonious approach, in terms of resources and effort of the researcher, but it produces the weakest results and raises the greatest doubts in terms of methodological rigor.

Purposive (judgment) sampling is the most commonly used approach in qualitative interview research. Here, the researcher makes an a priori judgment that certain categories of individuals are important and justifiable, based on the issues being investigated. The selection criteria must be acknowledged as it will have a significant bearing on the findings. A range of purposive strategies are possible (see: Patton, 1990).

Finally, theoretical sampling is driven by an aim to build theory emerging from research data. This approach is most commonly used in grounded theory and preceded by purposeful selection (Fig. 1). Subsequent samples may be selected to test the developed theory.

These strategies often overlap. Many studies contain an element of convenience or opportunism in the sampling approach. However, conceptually driven approaches are more desirable.

Conclusions

There is no universal formula governing sampling strategy or size in tourism qualitative interview research. It cannot be determined mechanically, it emerges in the creative process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. It depends on many factors (Fig. 1) – including research assumptions, and the characteristics of the researcher and participants, research context including time, financial resources and ethical issues which require researcher's reflexivity. In a synthetic way, these sampling criteria and considerations are organized and described in this text, along with some guidelines for researchers. Success in selecting a sample depends on researchers' deployment of correct sampling approaches, their use in relation to the context of the study, the ability to clearly outline researchers' approach, criteria, positionality and descriptive details and their suitability to fulfil the research purpose.

Funding

The research note was prepared based on experience in qualitative research sampling gained, among others, during running the project financed by the National Science Centre (no. 2017/27/B/HS4/01051).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Katarzyna Czernek-Marszałek: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Scott McCabe:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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