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Approaches to sampling and case selection in qualitative research: examples in the geography of health

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the question of sampling (or selection of cases) in qualitative research. Although the literature includes some very useful discussions of qualitative sampling strategies, the question of sampling often seems to receive less attention in methodological discussion than questions of how data is collected or is analysed. Decisions about sampling are likely to be important in many qualitative studies (although it may not be an issue in some research). There are varying accounts of the principles applicable to sampling or case selection. Those who espouse ‘theoretical sampling’, based on a ‘grounded theory’ approach, are in some ways opposed to those who promote forms of ‘purposive sampling’ suitable for research informed by an existing body of social theory. Diversity also results from the many different methods for drawing purposive samples which are applicable to qualitative

research. We explore the value of a framework suggested by Miles and Huberman [Miles, M., Huberman, A., 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis*, Sage, London.], to evaluate the sampling strategies employed in three examples of research by the authors. Our examples comprise three studies which respectively involve selection of: healing places™; rural places which incorporated national anti-malarial policies; young male interviewees, identified as either chronically ill or disabled.

The examples are used to show how in these three studies the (sometimes conflicting) requirements of the different criteria were resolved, as well as the potential and constraints placed on the research by the selection decisions which were made. We also consider how far the criteria Miles and Huberman suggest seem helpful for planning sample™ selection in qualitative research.



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Keywords

Qualitative methods; Sampling; Geography of health

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