Purposive Sampling[1]

Ted Palys
Simon Fraser University

To say you will engage in purposive sampling signifies that you see sampling as a series of strategic choices about with whom, where and how to do your research. Two things are implicit in that statement. First is that the way that you sample has to be tied to your objectives. Second is an implication that follows from the first, i.e., that there is no one "best" sampling strategy because which is "best" will depend on the context in which you are working and the nature of your research objective(s).

Purposive sampling is virtually synonymous with qualitative research. However, because there are many objectives that qualitative researchers might have, the list of "purposive" strategies that you might follow is virtually endless, and any given list will reflect only the range of situations the author of that list has considered.

And yet, certainly there are some objectives and interests that characterize qualitative research. For one thing, qualitative researchers are less often interested in asking about central tendency in a larger group (e.g., "What do most people in this population think about an issue?"), and much more interested in case study analysis – why particular people (or groups) feel particular ways, the processes by which these attitudes are constructed and the role they play in dynamic processes within the organization or group. Embedded in this is the idea that who a person is and where that person is located within a group is important, unlike other forms of research where people are viewed as essentially interchangeable. Research participants are not always created equal – one well-placed articulate informant will often advance your research far better than any randomly chosen sample of fifty – and the way we sample needs to take that into account.

The general theme here is that the biggest question any researcher needs to ask him or her self is what exactly it is that s/he wants to accomplish and what s/he wants to know, and the appropriate sampling strategy will follow from that. Some examples of the kinds of purposive alternatives available include:

- **Stakeholder Sampling**: Particularly useful in the context of evaluation research and policy analysis, this strategy involves identifying who the major stakeholders are who are involved in designing, giving, receiving, or administering the programme or service being evaluated, and who might otherwise be affected by it.

- **Extreme or Deviant Case Sampling**: Sometimes extreme cases are of interest because

they represent the purest or most clear cut instance of a phenomenon we are interested in. For example, if we were interested in studying management styles, it might be most interesting to study an organization that did exceptionally well and/or another that had high expectations but did exceptionally poorly.

- **Typical Case Sampling**: Sometimes we are interested in cases simply because they are *not* unusual in any way. For example, years ago Howard Becker and some of his colleagues were interested in studying how medical students were socialized into the profession. They did their research at the University of Kansas Medical School – not a highly prestigious medical school such as Harvard or Johns Hopkins – exactly because there was nothing unusual about it and, for that reason, was probably somewhat typical of the medical school experience.

- **Paradigmatic Case Sampling**: A case is "paradigmatic" when it is considered the exemplar for a certain class. For example, if one wanted to study the management of professional sports teams, the paradigmatic case in hockey of a successful franchise would be the Montreal Canadiens; for baseball it would be the New York Yankees.

- **Maximum Variation Sampling**: Searching for cases or individuals who cover the spectrum of positions and perspectives in relation to the phenomenon one is studying, and would include both of the previous categories, i.e., both extreme and typical cases plus any other positions that can be identified.

- **Criterion Sampling**: This involves searching for cases or individuals who meet a certain criterion, e.g., that they have a certain disease or have had a particular life experience. For example, a colleague of mine is doing research with men who have been clients of sex workers; this would be considered criterion sampling.

- **Theory-guided Sampling**: Researchers who are following a more deductive or theory-testing approach would be interested in finding individuals or cases that embody theoretical constructs. As this could be considered a particular type of criterion sampling, it also illustrates the overlaps that can exist between these categories (e.g., theory-based sampling might also lead the researcher to look for particularly intense or extreme cases).

- **Critical case sampling**: Here the researcher might be looking for a "decisive" case that would help make a decision about which of several different explanations is most plausible, or is one that is identified by experts as being a particularly useful site because of the generalizations it allows, e.g., recent findings that life exists at the bottom of the ocean where there is no sunlight, bitter cold, and immense pressure, suggests that life can exist almost anywhere.

- **Disconfirming or Negative Case Samplin**g: With this strategy the researcher is looking to extend his or her analysis by looking for cases that will disconfirm it, both to test theory

and simply because it is often from our failures that we learn the most. The general principle here is, "If you think your results are not generalizable or the existence of a particular kind of case will undermine all that you 'know' to be true about a phenomenon, then look for that kind of case."

- **Expert Sampling**: Here the researcher is looking for individuals who have particular expertise that is most likely to be able to advance the researcher's interests and potentially open new doors.

These do not exhaust the possibilities but illustrate some of the strategic lenses through which purposive sampling can be considered. The general principle, however, remains, "Think of the person or place or situation that has the largest potential for advancing your understanding and look there."