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Random Sampling

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In random sampling, every data source in the population has an equal chance of being included in the sample. Because random samples are probability samples, this creates the possibility for generalizing to a larger population, but this generalizability is not absolute. To see that random samples are not automatically representative of the population from which they are drawn, consider the example of flipping a coin five times. This will produce a random sample of all the possible outcomes, but it is still possible to obtain either five heads or five tails—which definitely are not “typical” results.

The key point is that the statistics associated with random sampling simply define the probability of getting an unusual result rather than guaranteeing that the sample will actually match the population (e.g., in flipping a coin five times, there is a 6.25% chance of getting either all heads or all tails). In addition, the ability to make accurate generalizations from random sampling is highly dependent on sample size. In qualitative research, however, the sample sizes are typically so small that even random sampling would yield too little accuracy for meaningful generalizations. For example, a random sample of 20 people would have virtually no value for representing any sizable population—regardless of whether the data are quantitative or qualitative.

For some cases, the use of random sampling in qualitative research comes closer to what is technically known as “random assignment.” In particular, after a purposive sampling process locates a set of eligible data sources, the next step might be to use random selection in deciding which cases to study. Although this use of probability sampling would eliminate what are known as “selection effects” by ensuring that the size of a group in the larger population is the only factor that influences how often its members appear in the sample, it once again does not guarantee a representative sample—especially when the sample size is small. For example, if a researcher wants to select 5 people to interview from a pool of 30 eligible cases that are evenly divided between men and women, random sampling will produce results that are at least 80% male or female more than a third of the time (to be precise, 37.5% of such samples will have at least four men or four women). As this example demonstrates, random sampling is an inefficient method for creating representativeness in small samples. For many qualitative studies, a nonprobability sampling method, such as quota sampling, would be a better strategy for making certain that a small sample was well balanced with regard to the characteristics that are most important. Although quota samples are

not generalizable, a small size sample will make that consideration irrelevant for most practical purposes; hence, the more important goal is to avoid producing a sample that is obviously different from the population on some crucial characteristic.

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See also

- [Generalizability](#)
- [Nonprobability Sampling](#)
- [Probability Sampling](#)
- [Purposive Sampling](#)
- [Quota Sampling](#)
- [Sample Size](#)
- [Sampling](#)

Further Readings

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