Sociology Shortcuts

M16. Non-Representative Sampling

Although researchers generally find it useful to create representative samples, there are times when this is neither possible nor desirable:

1. Choice: If the researcher isn't interested in making generalisations from a sample - they might simply be interested in *the behaviour of a group itself,* rather than what they may or may not *represent* - they may decide to use non-representative sampling.

Case Studies, where the objective is to study a particular group (or case) in detail don't require representative samples if the researcher doesn't care whether the group is representative of any other, similar, groups. In this type of research the sample is, in effect, the target population.

Ward's (2008) research into drug selling among 'rave' dance participants in London, for example, simply focused on the behaviour of a relatively small subcultural group. This is a perfectly acceptable situation as long as the researcher doesn't try to generalise their findings to other, supposedly similar, groups.

2. Necessity: Circumstances sometimes make it impossible to create a representative sample and the researcher may be forced to settle for opportunity sampling a general type of non-representative sampling that has two main sub-divisions:

▪ Best opportunity sampling involves deliberately choosing a sample that gives the *best possible chance* to test an hypothesis. If the hypothesis is *false for this group*, it will probably be false for other similar groups.

▪ Snowball sampling: Just as a snowball rolling downhill gets larger as it picks-up more snow, a snowball sample picks up more and more people to include in the sample over time.

A researcher, for example, identifies someone in the target population who's willing to be part of their research. This person then suggests another 2 or 3 (perhaps more) people who are also willing to participate. These then suggest further possible participants until the researcher has a usable sample.

Wallis (1976)
Wanted to study a religious group called The Church of Scientology. When Church leaders refused to cooperate with his requests for information about membership, Wallis was forced to find *ex-members* who could put him in touch with current members. In this Way he created a (non-representative) sample of Church members to study.

Charlton, Panting and Hannah (2001)
This study of young children's mobile phone use and abuse used an opportunity sample of schoolchildren in the absence of any available sampling frame.
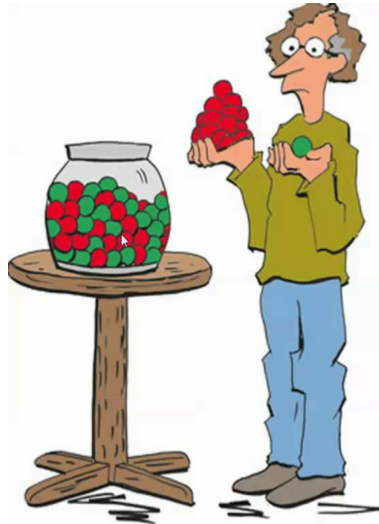
Goldthorpe et al (1968)
Wanted to test the Embourgeoisement Thesis - the claim the working class in Britain was becoming indistinguishable from the middle class

Their best opportunity sample consisted of highly paid car assembly workers in Luton, chosen on the basis that if any working class group was likely to show lifestyles similar to their middle class peers it would be this group of "affluent workers".

Advantages

This technique is useful when:

▪ No sampling frame is available.

▪ There are situations that would be impossible to research using another sampling technique. Sappleton et al (2006), for example, created a sample for their research into gender segregation in Audio-Visual industries by recruiting respondents "through personal referrals, prior contacts and cold calls".

▪ The researcher knows little or nothing about the characteristics of their target population.

▪ In terms of resources it can be a cheap and quick method (although this depends on both sample size and the speed at which it's possible to contact respondents).

Disadvantages

The sample is likely to be unrepresentative and there is no way of reliably checking its representativeness.

It can be a relatively expensive and time-consuming technique if the sample is large, widely dispersed across a large area and respondents are reluctant or unable to suggest further potential respondents.

A self-selected sample is a distinct possibility because this type of sample effectively "picks itself" rather than being selected by the researcher.

There is the risk of creating statistically inadequate samples - a sample that is too small to accurately represent a target population.

Cluster sampling

This type is usually used when a target population is spread over a wide area.

An opinion poll on voting behaviour, for example, might involve a sample of 1000 people representing the 40+ million people eligible to vote in a UK General Election. For a simple random sample the researcher might have to question 10 people in Newcastle, 15 people in Cardiff and so forth - an expensive, time-consuming process: results from the poll would be out of date before it could be finished.

To avoid these problems, a researcher can use cluster samples that:

1. Divide the country into smaller sampling units (such as constituencies) and then into small units within constituencies (boroughs).

2. Individual boroughs are then selected which, based on past research, show a representative cross-section of voters.

3. A sample of electors is taken from a small number of boroughs across the country.

4. Each cluster in the sample is a small scale version of the target population.

Advantages

This type of sample is time, money and effort efficient: relatively small samples can represent very large target populations.

Once a reliable sample has been established, the researcher can use the same (or very similar) sample repeatedly (as with political opinion polling, for example).

Where samples are based on relatively small areas, the researcher can easily expand or contract the sample size in subsequent studies.

Disadvantages

Unless great care is taken, the cluster samples will be unrepresentative of the target population. Some groups, depending on their size and diversity, may be over or under-represented in a cluster

Although it is a relatively cheap form of sampling, this is not necessarily the case. A sample that seeks to represent the whole of Britain, for example, is still going to be too expensive to initially construct for many researchers.