A Brief Introduction to Sampling in Qualitative Research

Prepared by Nicole for KWN Research Team
February 2012
Sampling: The Theory Behind It

• The idea behind sampling is that based on your sample of the population, you can draw inferences (generalize) about the population.

• You never observe a population; only a sample.

• For example, out of the Kosovo “population”, we are selecting some citizens to be interviewed.

• Based on our findings we can make inferences (and generalizations) about the entire “population”.
Differences in Qualitative & Quantitative Sampling

- Sampling differs in qualitative and quantitative research
- In quantitative, you select a RANDOM sample to make generalizations about the population
- In qualitative, you cannot do this because 1) you seek qualitative rather than quantitative findings; and 2) you usually study too few cases to make valid conclusions about the population (some cases are invariably missed because you cannot study them all)
- How you select your sample, therefore, has crucial implications for your research findings
So how do you select which cases to study in qualitative research?

A commonly used / respected sampling method in qualitative research is “variation sampling”, also known as theoretical sampling or purposive sampling.

Becker (1998) emphasizes the importance of sampling to include a range of variation: the normal (average), as well as the ‘deviant’ and the ‘angelic’ extremes.

These are selected based on your research questions and hypotheses.
Selecting Cases for Variation

• If we only look at people that are the same, we may exclude trends.

• So, we want to go back to Becker’s recommendation, and select a range of variation: the normal (average), as well as the ‘deviant’ (contradicting our hypothesis) and the ‘angelic’ extremes (supporting our hypothesis).

• Then we will be able to draw generalizations about all municipalities as we have looked at the strongest, weakest, and average cases (as relevant to our questions).