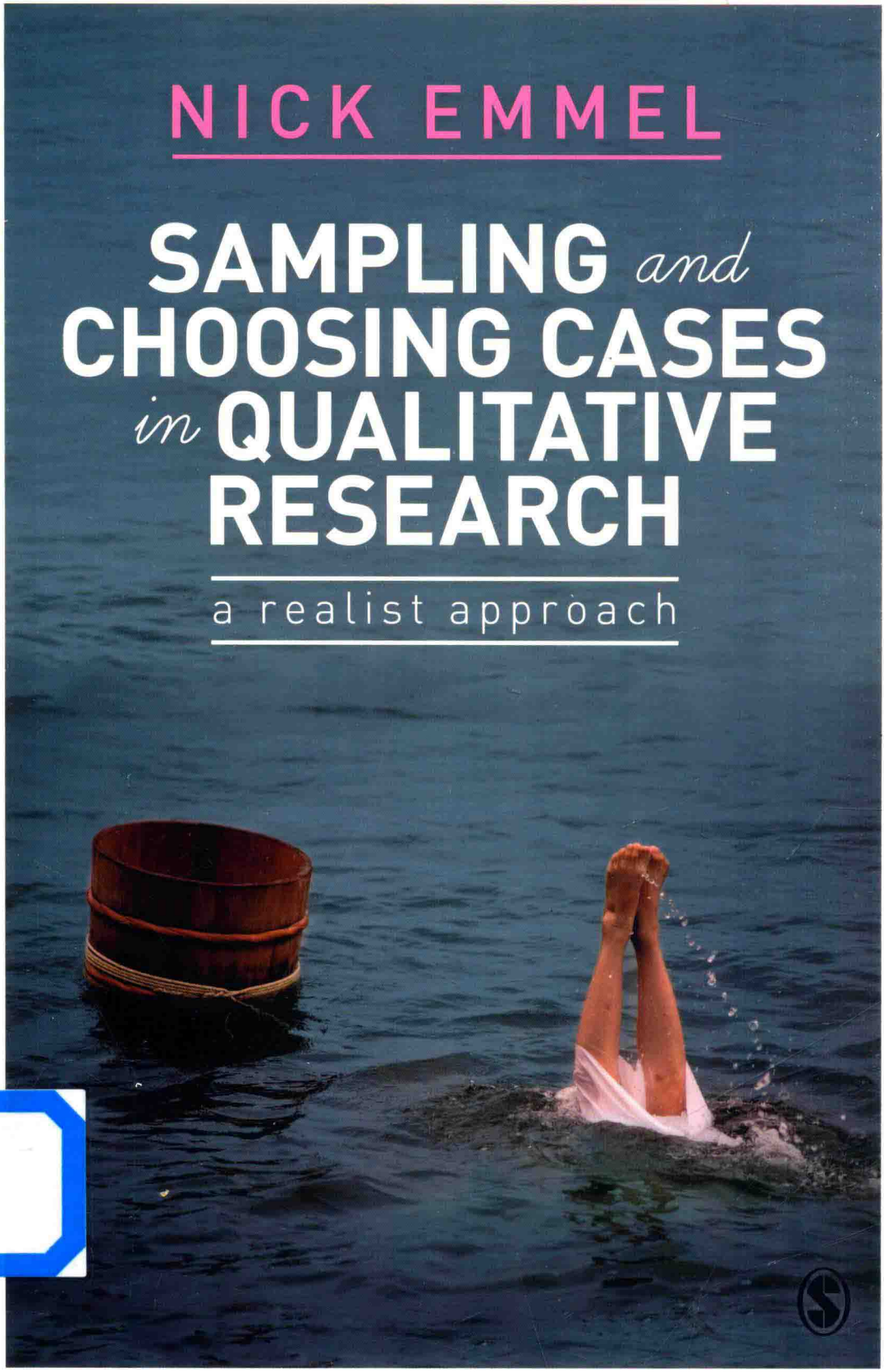
NICK EMMEL

SAMPLING *and* CHOOSING CASES *in* QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

a realist approach



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Emmel teaches research methods and the sociology and social policy of international health and health care at the School of Sociology and Social Policy, the University of Leeds. He has conducted extensive research in the UK and India interpreting and explaining processes of vulnerability, with a focus on inequalities and inequities in health. He is particularly interested in the methodological challenges of access to hard-to-reach individuals and groups and how these processes contribute to insight in our research. He has published extensively on these issues, including with Kahryn Hughes in the *SAGE Handbook of Case Study Research* (edited by David Byrne and Charles Ragin, SAGE, 2009). He was a co-investigator in the Real Life Methods Node of the ESRC's National Centre for Research Methods and in Timescapes, the ESRC's Qualitative Longitudinal Initiative.

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INTRODUCTION: FROM SAMPLING TO CHOOSING CASES

I am really not sure the verb 'sampling' does justice to the acts of choosing cases in qualitative research. Sampling in the sense most often used in research refers to two activities: first, defining a population from which a sample will be drawn and of which the sample will be representative; and secondly, ensuring that every person or thing from this predefined population has the chance of inclusion that is greater than zero and can be measured. Neither of these rules, which statisticians from Sir Arthur Lyon Bowley (1906) to Stephen Gorard (2007) insist upon in sampling strategies, applies to the choosing of cases in qualitative research. On the contrary, and as I will show in this book, what happens to sampling in qualitative research is best described through inverting these two rules and thinking about measurement in very different ways.

Nonetheless, I am obliged to use the term sampling because this is the way most writers on qualitative research methods talk about selecting units to be included in research.

If I find the term sampling not fit for purpose, the strategies proposed by various authors to implement sampling are so diverse as to confuse utterly. There is considerable divergence of views about where one should start in collecting a sample; one author will strongly advocate using a strategy of convenience sampling, the next will caution against its use, ever. One writer will make the case for theory emergent from data in decisions about where to turn next to select participants to a study. The next advocates bringing well developed research questions and ongoing intellectual work to these sampling strategies. The ways in which the sample in the research is reflected in the claims from the research is yet another area of contestation. For some, the sample is a bearer of grounded theory, emergent and discovered through coding. For others, claims as theories are anchored in the sample's real-life experiences in a grounded way. As for sample size, there are authors who advocate a quite specific number for a particular kind of study, and others who argue sample size is not the issue, but how researchers convince their audiences with the cases they are able to collect given the resources available to them.

Three cases of sampling: theoretical, purposeful, and theoretical or purposive

Given this divergent advice there can be little surprise that sampling is reported in qualitative studies in rather ambiguous ways. The terms used to

describe sampling strategies, theoretical, purposeful, and purposive, have wide ranging and occasionally contradictory meanings. Quite often these differences of meaning do not seem to be appreciated. During the writing of this book I found the following quotes in papers reporting qualitative research in peer-reviewed journals. (I've chosen not to cite the authors because I don't want to demean anyone, and where necessary I've restructured sentences so a quick Google search for the sentence within inverted commas won't find the original source). Consider the following:

1 We sampled theoretically using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) ...

or

2 We sampled theoretically and purposefully (Morse, 2007; Patton, 2002) ...

or

3 Our sample is theoretical or purposive (Charmaz, 2006; Mason, 2002).

I chose these three quotes because I feel they have useful pedagogic purpose; each outlines dominant theories about the methods that are legitimate grounds for generating knowledge about the social world in qualitative research. Also emphasised through this investigation of strategies for sampling is the considerable epistemological diversity among the relatively small number of methodologists who have considered sampling in qualitative research. To make some sense of this diversity the first part of this book presents three cases in three chapters.

The boundaries of the first case (Chapter 1) are explained and broadly defined through a common name, theoretical sampling, and, in turn, a common epistemological assumption that theory is discovered, emergent, or constructed from empirical observation of interaction. This empiricism, as Chapter 1 will trace, holds various methodologies together that use the term 'grounded theory'. But this case also reports and interprets considerable variation across these methodologies. This is exemplified in comparing the authorities cited in the first quote, which bring together two quite different ways in which theoretical sampling is understood and realised in grounded theory approaches. While certain underlying assumptions of grounded theory have stayed much the same since its inception in the landmark methodological account of *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* written by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), one area where there has been a significant change in approach is in theoretical sampling. The two accounts of grounded theory cited in the first quote characterise the role of the researcher implementing theoretical sampling very differently. For Glaser and Strauss (1967) theoretical sampling is achieved through the medium of the open, theoretically sensitive researcher – the *tabula rasa* (blank slate) that has become the pejorative criticism of this formulation of grounded theory – but

which for Glaser and Strauss provides the methodological device of an objective distance they required between researchers and researched, object and subject, and which allowed for the positivist twist in their account of qualitative research.

Wider debates in the social sciences in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are reflected through this investigation of theoretical sampling. In Chapter 1, I outline the ways in which debates in grounded theory methodologies have diverged between the positivism I have already described in the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

I will return to constructivist grounded theory shortly, but a way-mark between these two incommensurate claims for legitimate ways of knowing the world is provided by Strauss, with his new methodological ally, Juliet Corbin (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The blank slate is replaced with one chalked up with directions. Researchers are encouraged to have preconceptions about that which is to be studied. The chance of discovery is replaced by plans and strategies. As Strauss and Corbin (1980: 46) emphasise, quoting Louis Pasteur, 'chance favours only the prepared mind'. Serendipity and being prepared to discover are a considerable distance apart, so too are the two versions of grounded theory cited in the first quote.

The second quote is connected by a term, this time purposeful sampling, which both Janice Morse (2007) and Michael Quinn Patton (2002) use to describe sampling strategies. Yet, the way in which both of these methodologists use this term is quite different. For Morse (2007) purposeful sampling is a method or strategy applied to focus the theoretical sample in grounded theory. Morse, as I will show in Chapter 1, reworks the positivist and objectivist version of grounded theory. For her, purposeful sampling is a strategy nested in theoretical sampling to focus and test emergent concepts that follow on from the comparison of incidents in convenience sampling.

This strategy is quite different from sampling purposefully, as elaborated by Patton (2002). Here pragmatic judgements are brought to bear in showing how a purposeful sample derives its logic and power from the selection of information rich cases. These cases are chosen by the researcher to provide insight into issues of central importance to the research and always with an eye on the audience of the research, resources, and the best story to be told.

Convenience plays no part in Patton's definition of purposeful sampling. These are key differences in the ways in which purposeful sampling strategies are proposed and in particular how researchers' judgements inform the choosing of cases in the research. Michael Quinn Patton's formulation of purposeful sampling strategies is the subject of Chapter 2.

The third quote once again makes reference to grounded theory, emphasising its influence across qualitative researching. And, as I mentioned above, stressing the significant differences within the idioms of grounded theory.

A move often referred to as the reflexive turn in the social sciences is included in Kathy Charmaz's (2006) constructed grounded theory. This is expressed through the privileging of discourse and language as the precondition for the being of things. Theories are co-constructed through the reflexive acts of researchers and participants.

The second methodologist cited in the final quote, Jennifer Mason (2002), takes a quite different position towards reflexivity, which is worked out in her account of theoretical or purposive sampling. This is the focus of the third case presented in Chapter 3. The boundary of this case is another long-standing methodology in qualitative research – analytic induction. Mason (1996, 2002) argues that researchers explicitly bring wide ranging intellectual work to their research. Their decisions about whom or what to sample hinge on an interplay between this work and the empirical contours of the sample, which in turn inform sampling strategically and organically. There is no turn to reflexivity in this account of theoretical or purposive sampling, it has always been part of these strongly interpretative and analytic inductive strategies.

The organisation and purpose of Part One of the book

The first part of this book can be read as a methodological investigation across three different traditions, which I have broadly outlined above: first, the empiricism of grounded theory and theoretical sampling across a continuum from positivism to constructivism; secondly, the practicality and judgements of the pragmatic researcher implementing purposeful sampling strategies; and thirdly, the strongly interpretative analytic induction of theoretical or purposive sampling. One feature considered in the first three chapters are that all these three cases locate the real, as social phenomena that exist independent of our accounts of them, through outlining a particular relationship between evidence, meaning and mental phenomena (hereafter theory or ideas). And each of these cases provides quite different accounts of how sampling should proceed in qualitative research, and the justification for these.

These three chapters may be read as primers of three cases of sampling strategy, as theoretical, as purposeful, or as theoretical or purposive. Another way to consider the first part of the book is as a synthesis, from which methodological and practical insight can be gained towards thinking differently about sampling in qualitative research. This is, I suggest, the pedagogy of Part One.

A realist case for sampling in qualitative research

Part Two of this book presents a realist approach to sampling. Like Joseph Maxwell, who has recently published a realist approach for qualitative research,

I think 'realism can do some serious and important work' in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2012: viii). This is the work of practical methods and techniques that arise from the ways realists think the world is and the claims realism makes to legitimately investigate the world. Methodology, Malcolm Williams suggests, is the 'bridge between [this] metaphysics of the social world and its methods' (in Letherby et al., 2013: 114). Much of the discussion in Part Two is about a methodology of realist qualitative research and its implications for methods and techniques, including the practical challenges of sampling, working out the relation between ideas and evidence as cases, and justifying sample size in research.

To this end the argument for a realist methodology of sampling draws on examples from research across the disciplines of the social sciences. Much of this research does not explicitly claim to be using a realist methodology. I have interpreted and explained them in this way. In some cases, as noted in the acknowledgements, opportunities have arisen to discuss my re-interpretation with the original authors, but in many cases this has not been practical. I hope that the ways in which I have presented the work of others reflects the methodological sophistication I have seen in their work.

One reason for seeing realism in the methods of others is, I think, because most researchers are realists. As Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley (1997: 56) observe, 'claiming to be "realist" can sometimes feel like choosing to bat on the side of the "good"'. Indeed, cast around for long enough and there really does seem to be no end to the realisms being used in research, from social to structural, via subtle and scientific, it sometimes feels like there are as many versions of realism as there are realists researching. Given that one of the key features of realism, as I will discuss below, is that our explanation of the real can only ever be provisional, this is probably inevitable. The realism I use in this book draws predominantly on critical and scientific realism. I discuss the implications of this choice in much more detail in Chapter 4, for the moment presented below in five propositions is the scientific realism I adopt here.

Proposition One: 'Social reality is not simply captured by description or ideas, but is richer and deeper' (Malcolm Williams in Letherby et al., 2013: 105). Reality is stratified and our theories about the social objects we investigate refer to actual features and properties of the real world. These properties include real and relatively enduring mechanisms, which Roy Bhaskar (2008: 221 – parentheses in the original) considers to be 'nothing but the powers of things. Things, unlike events (which are changes in them) persist'. Powers, liabilities, and dispositions are an essential part of any realist explanation of sampling in qualitative research. These have causal efficacy, they have an effect on behaviour, and they make a difference. Amongst these powers are the researchers' concepts of that which they are investigating. But, as Maxwell (2012: 13) contends, 'our concepts refer to real phenomena, rather than being abstractions from sense data or purely our own constructions'.

Proposition Two: Accounts of real phenomena, including the sample in research, are weak constructions. The best we can say of these is that they raise consciousness about social objects we seek to interpret and explain.

Proposition Three: A realist investigation zigzags between ideas and evidence. It neither starts with specific empirical instances (induction), nor from general statements (deduction), but from fragile ideas (or more grandly, bold yet naïve conjectures) to be tested and refined through engagement with evidence. Realist research works out the relation between ideas and evidence. Sample choices and the ways in which these are worked and reworked as cases throughout the research allow us to explain to some degree this zigzag route of investigation.

Proposition Four: Reality, particularly of the social world, is only ever relatively enduring. As discussed in Proposition Three, our interpretation and explanation are efforts to work out the relation between ideas and evidence. These relations we present as models (or less grandly – ideas on the backs of envelopes – Greenhalgh et al., 2009), which can be transferred from one complex system to another to be tested and refined. These can never be described as typical or critical cases (as would happen in analytic induction) because interpretations and explanations are constituted of irreducible inner deliberation and public outworking in open social systems, as Margaret Archer (2000) contends.

Proposition Five: Interpretations and explanations – the insiders' perspectives and the outsiders' understandings – cannot be separated and are always provisional. They are implicated in theories of the middle range, which seek to explain what works for whom, in what circumstances, and why (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Pawson, 2006, 2013). They provide explanations as to how particular generative mechanisms (M) – the causal powers discussed in Proposition One – act on social regularities in specified contexts (C) to bring about observable outcomes (O); or as Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley put it more elegantly, C+M=O. We test and refine these theories through repeated and critical engagement within the scientific communities of which we are part and through further investigation.

The organisation of Part Two of the book

This book is divided into two parts. The first part I have discussed above. It presents three cases in three chapters of methodological arguments for theoretical, purposeful, and theoretical or purposive sampling, alongside examples of these methodologies of sampling in practice. In Part Two the focus is on a realist approach to sampling in qualitative research, although I have cause to return often to methodological debates raised in the first part of the book.

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