Descriptions of Sampling Practices Within Five Approaches to Qualitative Research in Education and the Health Sciences

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Abstract

Although recommendations exist for determining qualitative sample sizes, the literature appears to contain few instances of research on the topic. Practical guidance is needed for determining sample sizes to conduct rigorous qualitative research, to develop proposals, and to budget resources. The purpose of this article is to describe qualitative sample size and sampling practices within published studies in education and the health sciences by research design: case study, ethnography, grounded theory methodology, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology. I analyzed the 51 most highly cited studies using predetermined content categories and noteworthy sampling characteristics that emerged. In brief, the findings revealed a mean sample size of 87. Less than half of the studies identified a sampling strategy. I include a description of findings by approach and recommendations for sampling to assist methodologists, reviewers, program officers, graduate students, and other qualitative researchers in understanding qualitative sampling practices in recent studies.

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Keywords

qualitative sample size; qualitative sampling; qualitative inquiry; saturation; choosing cases; case study; ethnography; grounded theory methodology; narrative inquiry; phenomenology

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Qualitative research is a scientific method of observation to gather non-numerical data. This type of research "refers to the meanings, concepts definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and description of things" and not to their "counts or measures. This research answers how and when a certain phenomenon occurs." Qualitative research approaches are employed across many academic disciplines, focusing particularly on the human elements of the social and natural sciences; in less academic