Clip 6: Sampling

So the question that I'm going to consider is 'How does purposive sampling differ from probability sampling and why do many qualitative researchers prefer to use the former?'

Now, purposive sampling is a strategic form, deciding who to include in your study and the attempt to make that process of selection explicit. So who participates in your study is decided through a process of purposeful deliberation and in response to the needs of the research question rather than one that eludes to questions of randomness for instance and indeed the difference between purposive sampling and probability sampling, is that probability sampling is concerned directly with notions of randomness. This is because the physical techniques that allow a quantitative study to generalise from sample to population relies on the assumption that that initial sample is randomly drawn from that wider population. Purposive sampling on the other hand involves in selecting from very particular characteristics. The other thing that you shouldn't confuse sampling with is convenience sampling.

Now, convenient sampling is a form of sampling that is designed to be relatively efficient, it's about using whoever comes to hand for the purposes of doing something quickly. Purposive sampling is much more of a well-planned and executed exercise as I say involves a deliberate and informed process of making very specific selections. Now, because purposive samples aren't based on notions of randomness they can't be generalised in the same way as random samples are. However, that's not to say that research findings can't be meaningful elsewhere. Indeed they may well be instructive elsewhere but they won't be exhaustive of every other similar situation. So, how you translate findings from one context to another when using purposive sampling is one of care. Now purposive sampling is very common to qualitative research but actually it's more common in quantitative research than you might first imagine. Quota sampling, for instance, which is involves choosing a number of people based on characteristic is a form of purposive sampling because you are specifying the type of person that you want before you go out in the field and find them.

The reason why it's so popular particularly amongst qualitative researchers is because it allows you to concentrate on the needs of the research question and in some cases the emerging data rather than the abstract principles of statistical analysis. It's also worth noting that there are many different of purposive sampling. Which one you ultimately select, will depend on your research rationale and questions that emerge from it. But in actually making that selection and making that decision about the type of purposive sampling you are going to use you will make your research much more robust in terms of transparency and validity. If you read key concept 18.2 you can find more about the different types of purposive sampling.