Sizing up the Sample: Interviews, Damned Interviews and Statistics

Andre Stephens
PhD Candidate, Sociology
Overview

- studied influence of actors in economic reforms in Jamaica
- field interviews with policy elites

BUT

- what is the right sample size?
- how do we know it?

- **argument**: interviewers should focus on saturation, not sample size
Two Data Utilities

- data have two uses:
  - *inform* us of what we don’t know
  - *confirm* what we think we know

- best information $\rightarrow$ interview data
- best confirmation $\rightarrow$ statistical data

- generally true for qual and quant data
Assumptions

- Truthiness in inferential stats
  - makes *a priori* truth statement / hypothesis
  - tries to confirm likelihood of truth statement, given data

- Unknowingness in interview analysis
  - truth statement made after analysis
  - avoids confirmation bias in interpretation

- Formal assumptions, but informally different
Sample Sizing

- reflect bias toward confirmation utility, large-N studies

**BUT**

- for interviews
  - sample unit (interviewee) ≠ population observation (meaning)
  - not independent & identical

- E.g. from research: learning about Caucus w/out interviewing Caucus
Contextualizing

- interviewee misinformation can be informative

- interviewers should pay attention to context

- data are embedded in social world, not abstracted from it
Contextualizing: Power Heuristic

- e.g. from research: contextualising forms of capital
- technocratic/ideological
- regulatory/managerial
- financial/productive
- reputational/network power

- IMF’s technocratic and reputational capital shape influence
Optimizing Data Collection

Analytic Efficiency of Statistical Data

Analytic Efficiency of Interview Data

K - information

N - sample size