

## **Structural Sampling: A Technique for Illuminating Social Systems**

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### **Chapter for *Handbook of Innovative Qualitative Research Methods: Pathways to Cool Ideas and Interesting Papers***

#### **Area (1): Innovative Research Problems and Designs**

#### **Abstract**

In this chapter we discuss a sampling technique that has been employed in recent works, but has yet to be delineated as a distinct methodology: “structural sampling.” Structural sampling allows the investigator to illuminate the inner-workings of a social system by interviewing actors in a variety of roles and making comparisons across multiple levels of analysis. We describe the technique of structural sampling and its purpose, elucidate the benefits and challenges of structural sampling, provide several examples to illustrate potential uses of this technique, and situate structural sampling in the context of extant qualitative research methodologies.

## Introduction

Qualitative research has been heralded for contributing novel insights and theoretical perspectives to the management and organizations literature (Eisenhardt, 1989; Pratt, 2009; Van Maanen, 1979, 1998; Whetten, 1989). The processes used by qualitative researchers to achieve these outcomes are often invisible to the reader, yet a set of principled, systematic approaches underlies the practices followed by qualitative researchers. In this chapter we illuminate a sampling technique that has been employed in recent works, but has yet to be delineated as a methodology: “structural sampling.”

Structural sampling is a technique designed to uncover the inner-workings of a social system. Social systems are comprised of various sets of actors, each occupying different roles and potentially engaging in different practices. As a result, social systems can be complex and multifaceted, and the full set of roles, as well as the norms and behaviors present in the system, may not be known at the start of a study. Structural sampling employs an open, emergent, and systematic sampling approach to meet this challenge. As a result, the practice of structural sampling departs from traditional sampling methodologies in two primary ways. Structural sampling guides a researcher to identify the full set of roles in a social system and thoroughly investigate each of these roles. These roles may be uncovered over time, as more data are collected and informants’ perspectives synthesized. In contrast, traditional qualitative sampling methods instruct the researcher to pre-specify the roles to be studied. Structural sampling also encourages researchers to gather data on the social system from people who participate in the system *and* people who interact with the system or are affected by it in some way. In contrast, traditional qualitative sampling methods often focus on gathering data from the focal actors of interest.

Structural sampling can be used to investigate a wide range of social systems: for example, an organization, a segment of an organization, or the relationships among multiple organizations, markets, or fields. In addition, a wide array of theories and research questions can be examined through structural sampling. To illustrate this point, we present a number of examples of structural sampling. Our foray into the literature to identify examples is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrate the range of scholarly work that can be conducted using this approach. The examples presented also provide interested scholars with materials to further support and inspire their own studies by providing examples of published descriptions of methods, by showing how large volumes of data collected using structural sampling have been synthesized to build new theory, and by providing examples that illustrate how the details of complex social systems can be concisely communicated.

Our goal is to make this sampling technique explicit, characterize appropriate situations for its use, and help make its application increasingly accessible and attractive to senior and budding scholars alike. We begin by describing the purpose and technique of structural sampling, and then provide examples of structural sampling, delineate several potential uses for structural sampling, contrast it to other qualitative research methodologies, and highlight its advantages and challenges.

### **The Purpose of Structural Sampling**

We envision structural sampling being most useful when researchers are interested in one or more of three objectives: to identify and understand the actors who shape and are shaped by a particular social system (Coleman, 1994); to uncover the relationships—and the content of those relationships—between actors occupying different roles; and/or to understand how the norms,

rules, or other aspects of the social system's governance structure shapes individual behavior and relationships (See *Figure 1*).

### **The Technique of Structural Sampling**

Structural sampling is a data collection technique for illuminating how social systems are structured and how they function. Structural sampling seeks to uncover the inner-workings of a complex social system composed of actors in heterogeneous roles or positions. Doing so often requires the identification of roles within a social system and/or of the relationships among those roles. Because the sets of actors and/or their relationships may not be clear at the outset of a study, structural sampling is, by necessity, an open and emergent sampling technique. By “open”, we mean that, in contrast to traditional qualitative sampling methods, which tend to pre-specify the characteristics of the sample population to be studied, structural sampling requires the researcher to identify the roles played by multiple sets of actors in a social system. By “emergent,” we mean that these roles may be uncovered over time, as more data are collected, and more informants' perspectives synthesized.

In some cases, the researcher may understand the salient roles within a social system at the outset of the study, and be interested in collecting information from people occupying these roles. In others, the identification of roles may be a wholly emergent component of the research process. In such cases, the process of data collection is often simultaneous with the process of role identification. As a result, role identification does not necessarily precede the onset of data collection or necessarily even occur as a “first stage” of data collection. Most cases are likely somewhere in between these two extremes, with the researcher being able to identify some roles at the outset of the study, while being unaware of others. The researcher should also be open to

new understandings, and be willing to revisit preconceived notions of how the social system functions in light of new data.

The process of identifying roles will often require iteration and a deep understanding of the social system that often begins to coalesce in the later stages of data collection and analysis. Roles can be especially tricky to identify, because salient roles are often different from formal titles and there are also situations where no or few organizational titles exist (e.g., open source software communities or Wikipedia). We encourage researchers to refrain from blindly using formal structures and titles to guide their sampling or analysis.

There is no magic formula for identifying various roles. This process requires analysis, observation, insight, and dedicated effort. There are however, practices one can engage in to ensure that data are collected to support identification of roles and an understanding of the social system. These are the practices that we seek to illuminate, and we refer to as structural sampling.

Scholars employing this method should be open to using learning and intuition as they gather data on the social system. Following a “hunch” may uncover knowledge that dramatically alters the researcher’s understanding of how or why a social system functions. The cost of engaging in learning is relatively low—an additional handful of interviews or observations—while the potential benefits are high. And, the costs of *not* being open to new insights during the data collection process are high as it may result in a skewed understanding of the system.

Truly understanding a social system requires being sensitive to its broader social context, to the rationale behind a system’s organizational design, and to the perspectives of actors both in and affected by the social system. To this end, we identify two categories of actors whose perspectives might be collected in the course of structural sampling: central participants and external participants. Central participants represent the focus of the analysis; these are the actors

who make up the social system of interest. External participants are actors located at or beyond the boundaries of the focal social system who can provide detailed perspectives on the system.

### *Investigating the Social System from Within*

Structural sampling seeks to assist the scholar in identifying the positions that various actors occupy in a social system and the relationships among these positions. Doing so involves identifying and speaking to participants in the social system, as well as those connected to it. A researcher may define the boundary of a social system in various ways; often this boundary will echo the system's formal boundaries, but it may also contract or recede as necessary to allow the researcher to communicate how a system's underpinnings pertain to the phenomena of interest.

One of the outcomes of structural sampling should be the identification of the role types that comprise the *core* of the social system. Central participants are actors who comprise the core of the social system. Understanding their actions, interactions, beliefs, and the outcomes they create is critical to the study. We differentiate between two types of central participants: visible and emergent participants. Visible participants are particularly easy for the researcher to identify; they are likely to be well known outside or within the social system. Despite their visibility, these individuals are not the only relevant actors in the social system. Emergent actors may take longer to identify and or approach. They may be instrumental to the functioning of the social system, but less visible—perhaps they operate “behind the scenes” or they are less vocal about their actions and contributions. Both visible and emergent participants are critical for a nuanced interpretation and analysis of the data. Researchers should take care not to “overweight” the views of one set of actors/system participants over another. In fact, it is in reconciling the perspectives of different actors that a nuanced view of a social system can emerge.

Data collection and analysis for studies employing structural sampling may be particularly time consuming, because social systems are often, although not always, composed of multiple sets of actors. Identifying the roles played by each set of actors and understanding the interconnections among sets of actors is a crucial component of the researcher's work. Adding complexity to this task is the fact that even actors who occupy the same or similar roles may provide varying perspectives on the social system. Thus, to arrive at a satisfying conclusion, the researcher will need to gather data from multiple individuals occupying each role and make sense of the similarities and differences amongst their accounts.

### ***Putting the Social System in Context***

Data from such external actors enables researchers to paint a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of interest, and to account for systematic "blind spots" of central actors. The perspective of external actors benefits research by allowing for a better understanding of agency, path dependence, or system interdependencies.

We classify external actors into two types: proximal and distant actors. Proximal actors are often in a position to provide the researcher with a broad and potentially deep understanding of all or components of the social system. For example, a researcher interested in understanding an industry might contact a well-established attorney or consultant catering to that industry, an industry analyst, the author of a book documenting the history of a particular industry, or the editor of an industry trade journal. Pragmatically, researchers may find it useful to contact at least some proximal actors while planning or in the early stages of a study. Distant actors are further from the social system, but may also have useful insights on the system, and may shape and be shaped by the system.

Differentiating between proximal and distant external actors allows the researcher to contextualize a social system by seeing the effects of the social system on various actors, as well as analyzing the factors and actors that shape and influence the social system. We believe it is necessary for a researcher to develop these understandings, because it is only by possessing these understandings that the researcher can decipher the function and purpose of the social system and its constituent elements.

### ***When is Sampling Complete?***

The focal social system is both nested in and connected to other social systems. Therefore, each scholar must draw bounds around their phenomenon of interest: “Not everything can be examined at once and limitations of scope and depth abound” (Van Maanen, 1998, p. xiii). Scholars employing structural sampling must be cognizant of the boundaries of the social system they are studying, while being aware of system dependencies and contributions to adjoining social systems.<sup>1</sup>

Social systems are complex and inhabited by a variety of actors in heterogeneous roles. No single type of actor is inherently more important than others. Yet, the nature of the research question and of the phenomenon of interest may result in focusing the analytical lens on a particular role or set of roles. For example, researchers interested in understanding how financial analysts evaluate firm strategies may focus their sampling on analysts across several market research firms, while interviewing a smaller number of company CEOs. Conversely, a researcher interested in how firms develop strategies might interview a large number of CEOs and other executives, while interviewing a smaller number of analysts.

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<sup>1</sup> Practically speaking, we observe that researchers often focus on a large sample of central actors, while interviewing several external actors to learn more about the context.

## **Benefits of Structural Sampling**

Structural sampling provides researchers with three distinct benefits that cannot be attained using pre-specified sampling techniques: it allows the researcher to recognize and take into account the complexity of a social system; capture the different voices present in the social system; and understand the forces shaping everyday life within the social system. Social systems are complex and composed of different, interdependent sets of actors. This complexity is difficult to account for when collecting data only about one type of actor. So even in cases when scholars are primarily interested in theorizing about a social system's visible central actors, we advocate gathering data on and from emergent central actors and external actors to provide a more nuanced image of the phenomenon of interest.

Different actors within the social system may possess different perspectives on the phenomenon of interest. Understanding these perspectives is a critical component of a researcher's work. The term *poly-vocality* refers to the idea that organizations are “discursive spaces where heterogeneous and multiple voices engage in a contest for audibility and power” (Belova, King, & Sliwa, 2008). Gathering data on a variety of central actors is crucial for adequately representing the poly-vocality in the social system, including the competing frameworks and heterogeneous perspectives that coexist in it. Gathering data from external actors will benefit a research project in this regard, as external actors may have a broader set of perspectives—both laudatory and critical—on the outcomes achieved within the social system. Moreover, they may, in some cases, be more willing to share knowledge pertaining to rifts or disagreements occurring within the social system than central actors. Obtaining such knowledge from external participants prepares a researcher to open dialogues with system participants on these issues; direct the conversation such that relevant issues are discussed, explored, and

ultimately understood by the researcher; and/or develop more nuanced interpretations of what system participants are saying (or “hinting at”).

Structural sampling also allows the researcher to depict the nuances of life within a social system. Structural sampling affords researchers at least two avenues for capturing these nuances. Researchers can use structural sampling to uncover the forces affecting everyday life within the social system. These forces span rules, norms, culture, beliefs, power, etc.<sup>2</sup> Such forces can be best identified and understood in context, that is to say by understanding the objectives of those creating and supporting the forces, as well as the effects of the force on the perspectives and behaviors of others. By collecting data from and on actors occupying a variety of roles in the social system, structural sampling also opens the door to inclusion of data on or from “unexpected” actors whose roles and insights may change scholars’ understanding of the phenomenon analyzed. This may allow the researcher to discount alternative social mechanisms or better account for the particularities of the context examined. Data on the forces shaping everyday life can be combined with unexpected insights to arrive at depictions of everyday life within the social system from the perspectives of different actors.

### **Challenges of Structural Sampling**

Structural sampling also presents some challenges. Chief amongst these are challenges related to access to actors and presentation of data in limited space. Similar to other qualitative data collection methods, access may represent an inherent problem in structural sampling approaches. Access to actors situated in high-power roles, corporate employees, or parties engaged in conflict, for example, may be limited or precluded. Even when access is granted,

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<sup>2</sup> In this way, the system characteristics that can be captured by structural sampling go well beyond structural interdependencies.

scholars must take care to differentiate between open responses and “canned” public relations or legal responses that lack informative value for the research project. In such cases, researchers may need to seek out respondents who are willing to share their views openly, collect data over time in the hopes that actors will become more transparent as situations change, and/or carefully annotate the source and potential informant biases within the manuscript.

From a presentation perspective, scholars employing structural sampling may struggle to abide by the page limits being imposed with increasing stringency by journals. Methods and findings sections may be lengthy in order to describe and explain the rationale for using particular sampling and analysis methods. Despite this challenge, we join other researchers in advocating clear description of data collection methodologies employed, particularly in light of the variety of qualitative data collection, sampling, and analysis currently in use (Bettis, Gambardella, Helfat, & Mitchell, 2014). Additionally, the complexity captured by structural sampling methods, whereby researchers account for the roles of informants and the network of relationships connecting actors, can also make it difficult to present findings in a limited number of pages. We suggest that scholars in such situations begin by sharply separating data that was used largely for sense-making purposes from data that illustrate the core findings. While both sets of data feed the analysis and should be described in the methods section of the manuscript, only those data that illustrate the core findings should be included in the manuscript.

### **Examples of Structural Sampling**

**Table 1** summarizes several examples of structural sampling that we have encountered in management and social science research. The list includes published qualitative research studies that employ a data collection method similar to what we term structural sampling. Several of these papers serve as inspiration for our approach—and more broadly, as inspiration for our own

research investigating social structures. This list is by no means exhaustive. We use each of these works to illustrate the key advantages to be gained by structural sampling: the opportunity to account for social system complexity, poly-vocality, and rich description of the phenomenon of interest. For each key benefit, we describe one example in depth and briefly mention one or two other examples that illustrate the benefit.

Structural sampling allows scholars to map the complexity of a social system. We see this illustrated in Kellogg's (2009) work on organizational change in hospital settings. Kellogg conducted interviews with central and proximal actors to gauge pre-change support for the new regulation at different levels in the social structure of two hospitals. This enabled her to account for the complexity of the social system by being sensitized to particular actor types and preexisting relationships and to power dynamics in relation to organizational change. Barley (1986) illustrated social system complexity and power dynamics as a result of organizational change engendered by the introduction of a new medical imaging technology used within hospitals. Turco (2010) examined the importance of cultural schemas in reproducing social structures of occupational inequality in the leveraged buyout industry.

Structural sampling highlights poly-vocality in the social system by documenting heterogeneous frameworks employed by actors. This benefit can be observed in Turco's (2012) work on an organization providing motherhood services. For this study, Turco combined participant observation with formal interviews, including 55 interviews with central actors and 16 with external actors including "investors engaged in [evaluating the organization], consultants to the company, local hospital administrators and doctors who refer clients to [the organization], and directors of local nonprofits" and hundreds of informal conversations with customers and employees. She used these data to investigate various elements of organizational life, finding

that each type of participant viewed the organization differently. From the managers' perspective, the business model of the organization relied on providing support for new mothers, for a price; executives felt that the stress experienced by new mother's lowered their inhibitions to spend. From the customers' perspectives, new moms were drawn to the organization's framing of itself as a "safe, warm environment." From the employee perspective, Turco unexpectedly found significant resistance to the *commercialization* of motherhood services. Such resistance is illustrated by the following quote: "It's hard to support moms by upselling." Ultimately, the actions of employees ultimately led to the failure of the organization. By examining multiple voices the researcher was able to highlight the origins and motivation behind the framing of the organizational mission, and the extent to which various sets of actors facilitated or impeded the commercialization of personal settings that the organization attempted to achieve.

Taylor's (2010) research on new technology projects in the networking and database industry also illustrated how structural sampling can be used to capture poly-vocality. This study sampled central actors involved in innovation projects, and examined the perspectives of external proximal actors—executives of the technology firms studied—to understand how new projects were viewed from an executive perspective, in light of the overall firm identity and strategy. By attending to poly-vocality, this study highlights the resource allocation concerns and priorities of different actors (innovation team members versus executives), and their long-term consequences for organizational innovation.

Structural sampling can also be used to richly depict the nuances of life with a social system, as illustrated by DeSoucey's (2010) work on the French foie gras food industry. DeSoucey used structural sampling to provide a rich description of how "food production,

distribution, and consumption can demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment” (p.432) and of the effect of nationalism on the production and marketing of specific foods. Her data include extensive archival analysis and 40 interviews with a wide array of actors participating in the social and economic system of food production: French foie gras producers, high-level industry representatives, social movement activists, consumers, chefs, tourism employees, and local government officials. By employing a structural sampling approach, DeSoucey richly documented the “salient roles played by history and tradition in supporting contemporary cultural identity and uniqueness” (p.448) as layers in the creation of cultural markets and institutionalized protections in the European Union. Shah (2006) used structural sampling to richly depict the “organizational life” of participants in open source communities, showing how different governance structures shaped individuals’ decisions to contribute to the community and their adoption of new roles over time. Kunda (2006) also used structural sampling to portray life inside a high-technology organization, showing how culture can be used a vehicle for influencing employee behavior and perception of work experiences.

### **Structural Sampling in the Context of Qualitative Sampling Methodologies**

Many qualitative researchers have built their samples through purposive sampling or one of its variant forms—quota and snowball sampling; all of these sampling methods seek to identify actors based on specific criteria. Purposive sampling groups actors according to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question. Quota sampling involves specifying how many people with particular characteristics to interview at the onset of the study; the key distinction between purposive and quota sampling is that in quota sampling the number of individuals interviewed in various subgroups of the population reflects their proportions in the population. Snowball sampling is used to identify interviewees in hidden or hard-to-reach populations that

are not readily accessible to researchers. Snowball sampling allows a researcher to identify relatively *homogenous* members of a population by requesting that informants provide introductions to their peers.

Each of these sampling techniques focuses on assembling samples of actors who occupy similar roles within a social system and involves *pre-specification* of the criteria used to select actors. These sampling methodologies are thus best suited for understanding a particular practice or behavior, aspects of relationships between actors in a relatively well-understood social context, or the perspectives of a *single* type of actor. We advocate the use of structural sampling when a researcher seeks to unveil the inner-workings of a relatively unknown social system or complex, little-understood social processes occurring within social systems.<sup>3</sup>

Structural sampling can be used in conjunction with various data collection methods, such as interviews, ethnography, and observation. Qualitative data may be supplemented with archival data. Data collected using a structural sampling methodology may be analyzed using grounded theory or other qualitative data analysis methods.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In this chapter we present structural sampling as a method for unveiling social structures and positions. Structural sampling advocates observing single roles in social systems from multiple perspectives, as well as identifying the full spectrum of roles in a social system. As a result, structural sampling can provide novel insights that may not be known or fully understood by actors within the social system (and hence not observable to researchers choosing to interview

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<sup>3</sup> Structural sampling may make use of a “snowball type” methodology. Similar to snowball sampling, informants can identify additional informants. As opposed to snowball sampling, however, researchers engaged in structural sampling might request informants to assist them in identifying important roles to be examined and informants occupying those roles (note that they may also engage in traditional snowball sampling as well in order to enlarge the group of informants of a particular type).

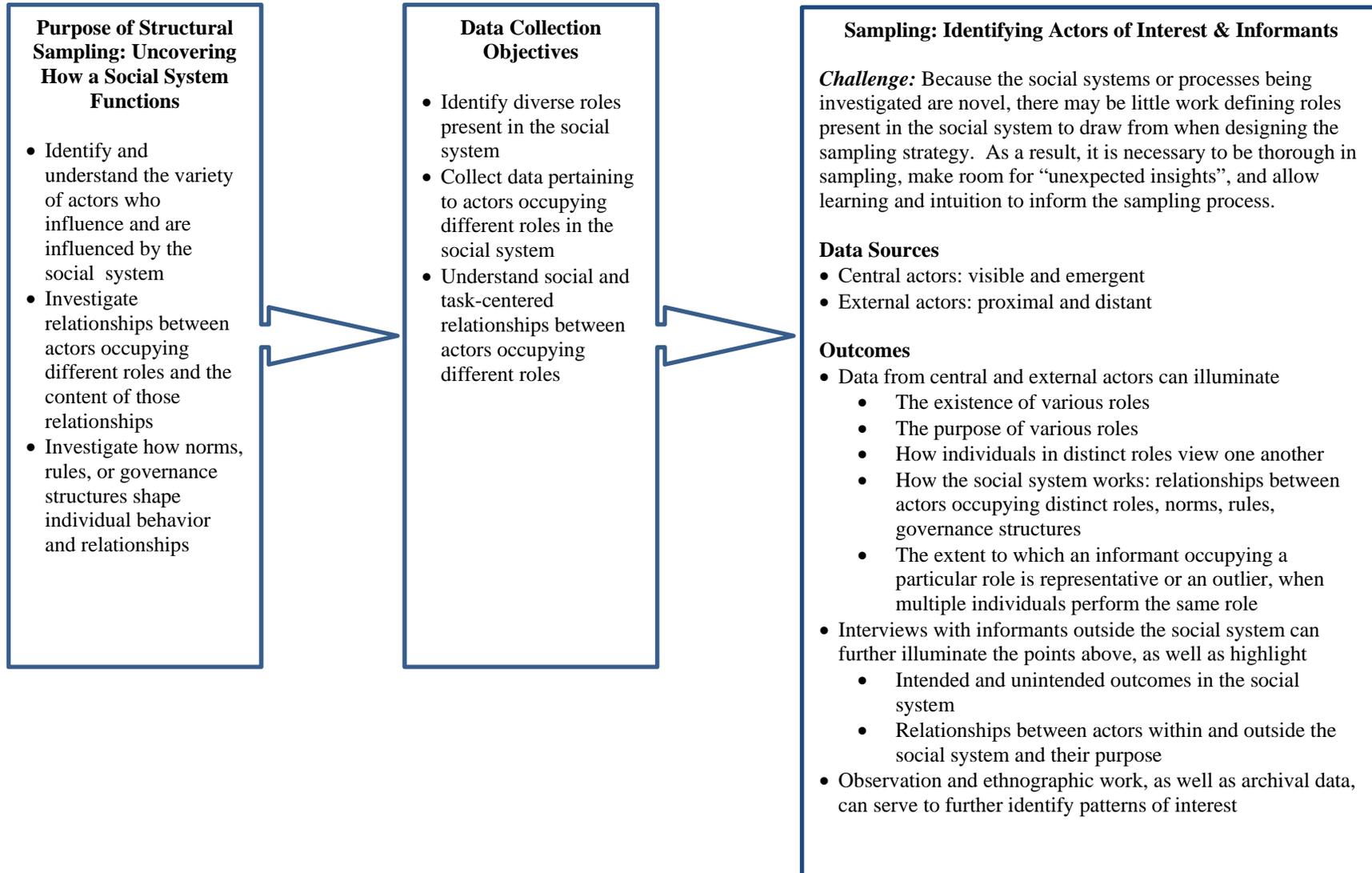
only those individuals occupying a particular role); uncover the poly-vocality of actors in a social system; and account for complex dependencies in social systems. We believe that this data collection approach can be used to illuminate a wide variety of theoretical questions. We suggest a method for implementation; review a series of studies that have employed similar data collection methods in order to demonstrate the wide range of potential applications for structural sampling and its benefits; and situate structural sampling within the wider field of qualitative research methodologies.

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## Figures & Tables

**Figure 1:** Structural Sampling: Purpose, Benefits & Technique



**Table 1:** Examples of Structural Sampling in Management and Social Science Research

Author (Year)	Title	Phenomenon of Interest & Setting	Details of Sample	Insights Generated	Benefits of Method:		
					1	2	3
Barley (1986)	Technology as an Occasion for Structuring: Evidence from Observations of CT Scanners and the Social Order of Radiology Departments	Effects of technology on organization. Two hospitals adopting CT scanners	Central actors (radiologists and technologists at two community hospitals) and distant external actors (senior radiologists at large medical centers)	Link between social system, introduction of new technology, and change in the institutionalized roles and patterns of interaction. Structures are dynamic	X		X
DeSoucey (2010)	Gastronationalism Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union	Case study of the link between nationalist sentiment and food: foie gras in France	Central and external actors: producers, industry representatives, activists, consumers, employees, chefs, government officials	Highlighted the power of national attachment in the context of production and marketing of specific foods	X		X
Kellogg (2009)	Operating Room: Relational Spaces and Microinstitutional Change in Surgery	Response to organizational change. Two hospitals	Central and proximal actors in the hospital setting	Allowed the researcher to identify the role that relational spaces—areas of isolation, interaction, and inclusion—play in a successful change process	X		X
Kunda (2006)	Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech	Culture as a mechanism for control in a technology	Central actors (engineers), and proximal external actors: staff, managers	Culture is not only about rules in the workplace, but also a vehicle for influencing experience	X	X	X

	Corporation	company	and executives of the firm	and behavior of employees			
Shah (2006)	Motivation, Governance, and the Viability of Hybrid Forms in Open Source Software Development	Community-based innovation. Two open source software development communities	Visible and emergent central actors; proximal external actors	Uncovered relationships between roles and individuals, and the differential motivations and contributions of individuals. Documented how structural differences due to governance structures affected the roles individuals chose to adopt	X		X
Taylor (2010)	The next generation: technology adoption and integration through internal competition in new product development	New product development	Interviewed actors all levels of the organization, from CEO to engineer, with emphasis on the project level (central actors), and also top executives of each firm (external actors)	Showed how competition among projects in the organization can lead to integrating new technology into incremental innovation for existing products	X	X	
Turco (2010)	Cultural Foundations of Tokenism: Evidence from the Leveraged Buyout Industry	Tokenism. Leveraged buyout industry	Central actors (employees) and external proximal and distant actors (recruiters, investors in LBO funds, executives of LBO-owned companies, investment bankers and consultants to the industry, and trade journalists)	Explored the importance of cultural schemas in reproducing occupational inequality	X		

Turco (2012)	Difficult Decoupling: Employee Resistance to the Commercialization of Personal Settings	Commercialization of personal settings. Organization offering support and services for new mothers	Central actors (founders, employees, customers) and external actors (evaluators, consultants, directors of non-profits)	Outlined the conflicting logics at play in commercializing personal settings. Exposed the tension between customer and investor evaluation of the business model and employee resistance to commercialization	X	X	X
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