

How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability.

- This article explores the issue of sample size in relation to theoretical saturation. The authors defined theoretical saturation as “when new information produces little or no change to the codebook” (Guest et al., 2006, p.65) and aimed to determine the point when new interviews stop to provide new information.
- Their findings indicated that 12 out of 30 interviews were sufficient to produce 92% of the codes. Furthermore, analyzing a dataset from one country showed a relatively established codebook structure.
- The authors suggest that the frequency of different individuals independently expressing the same idea is a better indicator of thematic importance than the absolute number of times a theme is coded (p. 72). Additionally, they found that codes identified in the initial stages of data analysis remained significant throughout the process.
- The authors conclude that data saturation occurred after 12 interviews, as 92% of the codes were developed in one dataset and 88% across all datasets. Code definitions remained fairly stable after the second round of analysis with 12 interviews.

Key learnings

- This article offers useful insights in determining when theoretical saturation is likely to be achieved, based on an empirical investigation. In a nutshell, 12 interviews seem sufficient, as they produced 92% of the codes in one dataset.
- I strongly relate to this topic because I often receive peer review comments questioning whether I have tested for theoretical saturation. It is a challenging task since theoretical saturation is an after-the-fact indicator, and it is so difficult to measure during data collection. To accurately determine when theoretical saturation is achieved, I need to analyze the data as I collect it, observing whether any themes occur frequently, and make decisions about further data collection accordingly. Testing for theoretical saturation after data collection is also problematic, as it is hard to determine whether the emergent theory is inadequate or if more data is needed to support theory-building.
- Overall, the authors provide a practical suggestion, and I will keep it in mind. However, it is important to note that the interviews in the study were conducted with a relatively structured interview guide. More open-ended or unstructured interviews can present more possibilities for systematic error in developing reliable and valid codes.