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Multi-layered sampling strategy for qualitative interviews: methodical reflections on sampling interviews with the European Research Council review experts

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ABSTRACT

Interviews are one of the primary methods of collecting empirical data in qualitative research. Given their significance, various aspects of interviewing have undergone methodological scrutiny by scholars aiming to refine the method and enhance its effectiveness. This article reflects on the process of selecting informants for expert interviews and proposes a systematic approach to sampling informants for expert and elite interviews. Specifically, we outline the process of selecting a subset of interviewees from a group of over 1,200 experts. Crucially, each individual in this population is identifiable by name, and there are discernible, meaningful differences among them that are visible to the researchers. Under these conditions, we propose a reflexive and systematic approach to stratified random sampling to diminish potential biases. This multi-layered sampling strategy not only minimises bias but also offers insights into the overall structure of the population of experts, providing essential contextual knowledge for analysis.

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Introduction

Interviews are central to data collection in qualitative research. In contexts where social capital plays a crucial role in securing access and establishing trust – such as in interviewing experts and elites – snowballing is an effective method for gaining access to informants (Littig, 2009; Mason-Bish, 2019; Miecz, 2012). However, emphasis on getting access through snowballing can lead to the exclusion of important stances from interview data and bias in research findings (Parker et al., 2019). This is particularly important in knowledge production through methods such as expert and elite interviews, where informants are regarded as knowledge holders on the topics under research (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019; Bogner et al., 2009; Gubrium et al., 2012).

We argue that in cases where information on the pool of potential informants is attainable to researchers and the meaningful differences within the population are discernible, a systematic recruitment of informants contributes to an inclusive interview sampling. Such sampling is an essential condition for knowledge production through the interview data that should capture epistemic diversity within the pool of experts. While the issue of standpoint differences has been

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discussed extensively in methodological literature on the conduct and analysis of interviews (Alby & Fatigante, 2014; Doucet & Mauthner, 2007), it has been under-studied for sampling interviews.

In this article, we reflect on the selection of interview informants as part of the recruitment process for in-depth interviews with academic elites serving as peer review experts. This is in the context of a research project that examines evaluative cultures in European academia by exploring how elite academics who serve as peer review experts understand the concept of scientific ‘excellence’ and relate it to the notion of ‘diversity’ within academia.¹ While the informants in this research are primarily regarded as academic elites and peer review experts in social sciences and humanities, there are meaningful differences between them. By meaningful differences, we refer to distinctions in informants’ standpoints and experiences as reviewers – differences that are essential for the quality of the interview sample and the credibility of the analysis. To achieve a sample that captures crucial diverse standpoints within the experts’ pool, we propose a multi-layered sampling approach.

The target population in our project includes scholars who served on evaluation panels for the social sciences and the humanities (SH) from 2010 to 2020. Although an exhaustive database of panel sets does not exist, the composition of each evaluation panel is publicly accessible from the funding agency’s website every year after the panels’ evaluations are finalised and announced. To provide a pool of experts, we first collected this annually released information on panel sets, and after an acute refinement, we created a data set of the overall group of panellists in a timeframe of 10 years, comprising a total of 180 extracted panel sets. This set consists of 1,241 scholars and scientists in various social sciences and humanities disciplines.

Using the available properties of the pool of experts, we defined significant differences within the pool that could be meaningful for the interviews. This includes, for example, the respective review panels, the scope of experience with the funding agency, the role in the panels, and the years in which the panellists served as reviewers. These sampling variables enable us to break the pool into subgroups (strata) based on common attributes. Applying stratified sampling then allows for representative sampling by choosing proportionately from each subgroup. This constitutes the first layer of our proposed sampling approach.

We then check this reduced pool or sample against another set of variables of interest, which we call post-sampling variables, to ensure that the recruitment contact list is also diverse across those variables. This contact list serves as a guide for informant recruitment, helping us to monitor inclusion and bias while allowing flexibility in the process. We demonstrate how this multilayered sampling strategy allowed us to reduce the pool of 1,241 candidates to 72, from which we developed a final sample guide of 24 interviews. This sample covers the diversity of the experts in terms of their panel units, roles and seniority on the panel, as well as gender, among other considered criteria.

The article details each step of our sampling, explaining the rationale for each step in our approach. It shows how the utilisation of mixed sampling methods allows for a more rigorous and better-informed research design. Finally, we outline the steps taken after the sampling process was concluded and discuss the broader insights gained from implementing the approach.

Interpretive knowledge and sampling in-depth interviews with experts and elites

The expert or elite interview is an instrument frequently used in empirical social research (Bogner & Menz, 2009).² As a data collection method, it is distinguished by a central premise: to access specialised knowledge through interviews with informants who hold what Meuser and Nagel describe as ‘institutionalised authority to construct reality’ (2009, p. 19). Such informants are thus characterised as experts or elites by their unique knowledge, extensive experience, and decision-making authority in particular fields (Littig, 2009; Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019).

Various methods of conducting expert or elite interviews cater to different modes of knowledge that research aims to generate – namely technical, process, or interpretive knowledge (Littig, 2009). Depending on their epistemological functions, expert interviews are exploratory, systematising, theory-generating, or problem-cantered³ (Döringer, 2021; Meuser & Nagel, 2009; Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019).

In terms of sampling expert interviews, it is noted that since the designation of expert or elite status often depends on the researcher's definition based on the research goals, the experts' pool is usually not clearly defined; therefore, the expert or elite interviews do not adhere to the quantitative principle of representative sampling (Littig, 2009). Furthermore, access challenges are common when attempting to recruit certain groups of experts or elites (Littig, 2009; Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019). For these reasons, particularly when the primary aim of the expert interview is to generate theory, snowball sampling is generally recommended, with saturation as the guiding principle (Littig, 2009; Meuser & Nagel, 2009). This is owing to snowballing's flexibility in sample size and its effectiveness in contact-generating and contact-tracing, which provide valuable insights for understanding the network of experts and offer contextual information for analysis (Noy, 2007). However, as a guiding principle for the sufficient number of interviews, saturation is conceived within the research process and thus irrelevant to a priori estimation. Estimates for a sufficient number of interviews are conventionally justified among researchers based on the aim and scope of research (Morse, 2000), the theoretical and analytical framework (Malterud et al., 2016), and practical constraints such as resources and research timeline (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Aiming to provide a more systematic approach to determining sample size in qualitative research, Mthuli et al. (2022) proposed an analytical tool based on four steps: 'Define, Explain, Justify, and Apply' (DEJA), as an alternative to the concept of saturation.

In the process of our research, the need to reflect on our sampling method first arose when we defined review experts in the context of the evaluative panels under study. We aimed to analyse valuation cultures within the heterogeneous context of different review panels that shape different clusters of review experts. Early in the research, we realised that there are meaningful categorical differences within the pool of experts. Thus, relying solely on snowballing could considerably limit our findings. Moreover, although variations in snowballing have been proposed to reduce its inherent bias,⁴ the method is primarily advised when researchers lack information regarding the complete pool. However, limited knowledge of the pool is not always the main obstacle in research involving experts or elites; rather, it is often the difficulty of gaining access to experts or elites that motivates the choice of snowball sampling (Littig, 2009). We argue that in the context of a sizable, apparent pool of elites and experts through which detectable, meaningful differences exist within the population, a rigorous sampling that is diversity-aware should be employed in the recruitment of informants for sampling interviews.

Accordingly, we propose a multilayered sampling strategy that adopts mixed methods. Our approach responds to the Mthuli et al. (2022) call to embrace various available techniques to provide analytic tools that assist researchers in mapping sample size prior to research. In doing so, our sampling strategy and justification of sample size are grounded in qualitative methodologies, thus avoiding then what Sim et al. (2018) called the 'ill-advised' adoption of statistical principles from quantitative research. We carefully employed quantitative tools to create contact lists for informant recruitment, enabling us to monitor the interview sampling for inclusivity. This approach also offers multiple access points for the swift generation and adjustment of contact lists.

Stratified random sampling: an alternative to snowballing for expert interviews

In our research on evaluating culture in European academia, we focus on the peer review evaluation panels of a large regional funding agency for the humanities and the social sciences. As we established earlier, we understand experts and elites as individuals with exceptional knowledge and authority that enable them to exercise power in a particular social context by applying such knowledge (Bogner et al., 2018). Accordingly, we define the funding agency's panellists as academic elites who are review experts. Our research focuses on analysing a sample of in-depth interviews with these review experts regarding their collaboration with the funding agency.

While all panellists are considered academic elites and review experts, there are significant differences within this group. These differences include diversity in terms of disciplinary and

panel affiliations, the scope of experience with the funding agency, panel roles, years served on panels, gender, and epistemic and methodological preferences, among other factors. Some of this structural information is available from the publicly accessible data on panellists. The question of how to choose an appropriate sample of interviewees that captures as much of this diversity of voices as possible in a timely manner is thus one of our central concerns in operationalising the research interviews.

To do so, we first identified the meaningful differences within the group of experts. These differences became variables of interest for forming sub-groups within the pool. We incorporated these variables into interviewee selection using quantitative methods. We combined probabilistic and non-probabilistic strategies in different steps of the research. While statistical logic is not fundamental to the credibility of the findings in qualitative research such as ours, by using quantitative methods, not only did we make an informed selection of interviewees in a timely manner but also created a comprehensive database of the experts through which we gained insights into a decade of panel sets which yields valuable contextual information for better understanding of our case study, preparation for interviews, and analysis.

The case study

In our research, we analyse evaluative cultures within European academia through in-depth interviews with elite academic experts who served on the European Research Council (ERC) evaluation panels. The ERC runs four major funding schemes: starting, consolidator, advanced, and synergy grants, with the first three sharing similar decision-making frameworks. Our analysis focuses on these three schemes, as they play a crucial role in operationalising the academic standards set by the ERC.

In addition to funding ‘excellent’ research, one of the ERC’s main ambitions is to project robustness, fairness, and regularity in its funding regime (König, 2017). The impression of the ERC’s procedure as ‘fair’ is as much the projection of its mechanics as it is the effect of its panels’ settings. This is crucial for the ERC, not least because the agency operates sophisticated machinery for evaluating a large volume of proposals. Three key features of this machinery are directly relevant to our sampling strategy: (1) the tripartite structure encompassing three domains and 25 panels, which underpins the decision-making process; (2) the expert selection procedure for the decision-making bodies (i.e. the panel sets); and (3) the role of the panellists. In the following sections, we describe the panels’ structure, which provides the basis for identifying the expert population in our study.

The structure of the population

The ERC operates across three scientific domains: Life Sciences (LS), Physical Sciences and Engineering (PE), and Social Sciences and Humanities (SH). Each domain comprises multiple multidisciplinary panels within the starting, consolidator, and advanced grant schemes, totalling 25 panels, of which six belong to the SH domain.⁵ Each domain holds annual calls for proposals, and each call is evaluated by a distinct panel set – a unique composition of experts in the relevant scientific fields. Given our focus on the SH domain, our study encompasses the six SH panels across the three grant schemes for a total of 18 SH panel sets annually (See Supplemental Figure 1).

The role of panellists is two-fold: they conduct individual assessments of proposals remotely and engage in collective decision-making at ERC headquarters in Brussels. As the panellists wield considerable decision-making power, the ERC’s ambition has been to establish a selection process that is professionally carried out through a combination of impartiality (when it comes to their own realm) and passion (when it comes to scientific intrigue, more generally).⁶ Among each panel’s members, one serves as the *principal inter pares* – the *panel chair*— who guides the decision-making procedure, assigns proposals to panel members for remote assessment, determines the panel’s

modus operandi for the panel meetings, monitors impartiality in the panel discussions, and enforces the ERC's conflict of interest guidelines.

Composition of panel sets

The arrangement of the panel sets has been shrouded in obscurity (König, 2017, p. 109); it is officially one of the tasks of the ERC Scientific Council, which serves as the supervisory body responsible for defining the overall 'scientific strategy.' While the funding agency releases the list of experts for all panel sets after the conclusion of each funding call, the composition of panel sets has been obscured by a combination of legal provisions, policy guidelines, and discretionary considerations. In practice, creating the panel sets is a continuous, collaborative work involving members of the Scientific Council, panellists who provide feedback on the work of previous panel sets,⁷ and ERC Scientific Officers, who manage the panel sets and are assumed to have the best overview of which expertise is missing or overrepresented, as well as insight into the quality of the panellists' performance.

It should be noted that while there is no legal requirement regarding quotas or other formal measures to guarantee diversity within the panels, given their centrality in the decision-making procedure, the ERC exerts tremendous efforts to create a balanced composition of the panel sets and has set (soft) goals to ensure gender, nationality, and institutional diversity in the panel sets.⁸ Over the course of the years, the ERC has established some policies to guarantee that each panel is well-balanced in terms of gender distribution and representation of disciplines.

Observable patterns in panel composition

Our analysis of the panels' compositions from 2010 to 2020 reveals several patterns. The first pertains to the rhythm of reinviting panellists. While many are invited back for a second funding call, approximately one-third of the panellists in each set are replaced with each cycle. The ERC also runs two sets of panels for each funding scheme, pausing one panel set every other year to allow panellists to apply for grants without conflict. In recruiting new panellists, our analysis shows that one source is the ERC's grantees and remote reviewers. This creates distinct categories among panellists based on their experience with ERC grants: (a) those who were granted ERC funding before serving on a panel, (b) those who have received grants after serving, and (c) those who have not received ERC funding at any point. Consequently, three key observations emerge:

- (1) The experts who serve as ERC panellists are selected based on academic reputation, with each panel also composed to ensure diversity in disciplinary backgrounds and the inclusion of female experts in panel sets;
- (2) The relatively stable recruitment and replacement procedures have resulted in a substantial number of experts who have served as ERC panellists, even within the restricted scope of SH panels;
- (3) Due to the ERC's panel structuring logic, there are distinct sub-groups of panellists, differentiated by panel affiliation, frequency of participation, roles within the panel (member or chair), and ERC funding status.

These insights are essential for our sampling strategy, as they inform the selection of interviewees from a pool of over 1,200 panellists.

Sampling strategy

Given that qualitative research is exploratory in principle, the number of interviews should emerge from the research process (Beitin, 2012) rather than being predetermined. Nevertheless, research proposals require a provisional estimate informed by theoretical, methodological, and practical considerations, including scope, budget, resources, and timeline.

In our research, we sought to include the diverse perspectives and experiences of these experts in a limited number of interviews, through which we wished to capture the critical aspects of the evaluation work performed by the panels. Although the anticipated number of interviews was acceptable to reviewers, it remained primarily a point of orientation. As we gained insights into the structure of the ERC panels, we aimed to interview at least one panellist from each identified subgroup. This prompted a reassessment of the initial estimate of 20 interviews stated in the research proposal.

In the following sections, we describe how we defined key variables that enabled us to categorise panellists and outline our approach to selecting and contacting potential interviewees.

Defining the variables of interest

Although the list of panellists was published annually, a comprehensive dataset of the entire pool of panellists suitable for analysis was not initially available. After cleaning raw data downloaded from the ERC website, the primary question was how to select informants from 1,241 evaluating experts who had served on ERC panels between 2010 and 2020. To mitigate potential biases, we utilised the available information on the panel sets to introduce two categories of variables of interest: sampling variables and post-sampling variables. These were then applied in two steps to select potential interviewees.

The available information regarding the panel sets provided panellists' names, panel assignments by year and funding scheme. Based on this information, we introduced the first set of variables of interest. Information regarding gender, discipline, and organisational affiliation was not provided, and due to time constraints, investigating and collecting this information for all 1,241 experts would not be feasible. However, given the importance of such characteristics for the interviews, we introduced a second set of variables to be used in the next step of selecting informants. The two sets of variables of interest are listed in [Table 1](#).

Sampling variables

The sampling variables include a subset of the attributes we captured while processing the dataset. Each SH panel is an interdisciplinary composition of scholars assigned to it. The '*assigned panel*' variable indicates one of the six SH panels that each panellist has served on. There are three separate panel sets for each funding scheme each year. The '*frequency of participation*' variable indicates the number of times each panellist served on a panel, up to five times. The '*role*' indicates whether a panellist served as a panel member or as a panel chair. The '*grantee status*' refers to whether a panellist has also received an ERC grant before serving as a panellist.

To avoid duplication in the randomisation and to give every panellist an equal chance in the selection, we needed to assign each panellist to precisely one of the subgroups based on each variable. Several panellists served in different panels in separate panel sets during the study period between 2010–2020 (for example, once in SH2 and twice in SH3). In these cases, we assigned the panellist to the panel they served on most frequently. If they served an equal number of times on two different panels, we randomly assigned the panellist to only one of the

Table 1. Variables of interest (source: authors).

Variables of Interest	Sampling Variables				Post-sampling Variables		
	Assigned Panel	Frequency of Participation	Role	Grantee Status	Gender	Method Preference	Grantee Vis A Vis Panellist Position
Characteristics	Six Panels	Once/Twice/ Three-Or- More	Chair/Member	With/ Without ERC Grant	Gender Pronouns	Qualitative/ Quantitative	Grantee-First /Panellist-First /Both

two panels. Similarly, the role of the panellist changed sometimes. Quite a few of the panel chairs had acted as panellists before they became chairs. In these cases, we established a rule that the role of panel chair should take precedence, as their experience in this role is of particular interest for interviews. This is because panel chairs' experiences are crucial to access for the research due to the significant role that they play on the panels and because being a chair indicates recognition by those creating the panel sets as particularly capable and committed to the institution.

Finally, under '*grantee status*,' those panellists who had received an ERC grant could be divided into two subgroups based on whether the grant was awarded before or after the first time one served in a panel. The distinction is important, as for the first subgroup, the grant may have been the primary factor qualifying them to serve as panellists in the first place. Those awarded the grant after serving on the panel could be argued to have gained insights into the evaluation before competing for the grant. Yet, the number of panellists holding an ERC grant, either before, after, or both before and after serving on the panel, was too small to qualify as a separate variable for sampling. Including these subgroups separately would have overrepresented them in the sample, so we used this variable for the post-sampling check of the sample of 72 panellists, the result of our actual stratified random sampling, which included panellists who were grantees.

Post-sampling variables

In addition to the primary attributes used to create the initial database, we also checked the random selections for three more attributes. While we consider these attributes important for the study, we recognise that gaining definite information regarding these attributes for all the 1,241 panellists is beyond our project's temporal and financial scope. Therefore, we only checked these attributes once we ran the initial random selection. The post-sampling variables included '*gender*' (the panellist's pronoun), '*methodological preference*' (i.e. whether more aligned to qualitative or quantitative work) as a proxy for epistemic preference, and '*grant status*' of the panellist with respect to when a panellist grantee had served on a panel.

Assigning a panellist as primarily quantitative or qualitative in their methodological preference was often tricky. With this limitation in mind, the exercise nevertheless allowed us to gain a better understanding of whether the panellists in the sample were from different epistemic communities. In short, these variables were intended to confirm that the sample basically fulfilled the criterion of diversity, meaning that the sample contained experts with diverse characteristics in addition to the four variables that had been used for the initial sampling. The assumption here was that, combined with the panellists' diverse disciplinary backgrounds, these variables reflected various perspectives and experiences that would emerge in the interviews.

Variables that could not be applied

We acknowledge that the selection did not consider other crucial attributes, such as disciplinary background, nationality, age, race, and ethnicity. We did not have access to any data source that consistently and reliably provided this information.

Step-by-step sampling process

The sampling process followed four steps. First, we rigorously cleaned the data to create an initial database, including panellists' names, their roles, the panels and the years they served. Second, we assigned names to sampling variables based on considerations detailed in the previous section. Third, the sampling process produced a list of names, which we cross-checked using post-sampling variables. Fourth, we repeated the entire sampling process iteratively until we recruited enough interviewees. [Figure 1](#) gives a schematic illustration of the process.

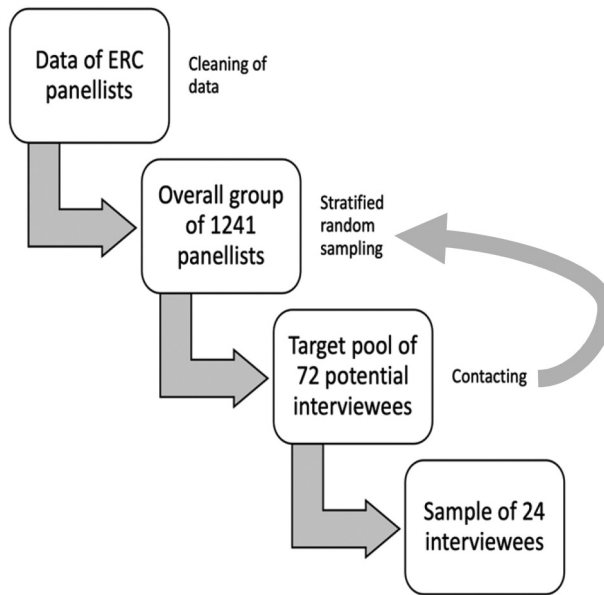


Figure 1. Schematic illustration of the sampling process (source: authors).

Step 1: Cleaning of data and preparing the database

The ERC regularly publishes information on the panellists for its funding calls after the end of the decision-making procedure. These data are made available annually in PDF files on the ERC website, where we retrieved the data in June 2022.⁹ Using a customised string-matching algorithm implemented in R,¹⁰ we cleaned the data to reduce 1,338 unique records in the ‘name’ column, some of which represented differing spellings of the same individual, into a list of 1,241 panellists. This list included the information regarding SH affiliation, role on the panel, the year(s) of their collaboration with the ERC, and the funding scheme for which the panel set was composed (starting, consolidator, or advanced). We then cross-matched this database with the ERC-granted projects from 2007 to 2020 using the above string-matching algorithm to identify some of the recipient panellists. We identified 212 panellist recipients.

Some characteristics of the panel sets. The preparation of the database and examination of the sample pool characteristics generated a detailed set of descriptive statistics, allowing us to capture the nuances of panels’ composition and observe changes in panel sets over the period from 2010 to 2020.

Our analysis reveals distinct patterns regarding the panel sets’ composition. The first notable pattern concerns the reoccurrence of panel members. There appears to be a rhythm to the re-invitation of panellists, with most members invited to participate in successive rounds of funding calls. At the same time, the ERC seems to be replacing approximately one-third of the panellists in each panel set for every new round. For example, Supplemental Figure 2 illustrates the reoccurrence and replacement of panel members on one SH panel between 2010 and 2020: of the 2010 panel set, four panellists continued for another round, and one was retained for two additional rounds. Similarly, from the 2012 panel set, three new panellists continued to a subsequent round, with two remaining for an additional three rounds.

Supplemental Figure 3 depict these recurrent panel participation patterns. The most common scenario is panellists returning three to four times when available, while 20–30 per cent of panellists only serve once within a given year.¹¹ This re-invitation trend

aligns with panellists' reports indicating that panel service requires some learning, suggesting that retaining panel members across multiple rounds ensures the preservation and continuity of this review expertise. The analysis shows that the ERC is quite adamant about ensuring that there is a certain fluctuation that generally limits panel members to a few terms, with only a small group serving on more than four occasions.

Concerning the inclusion of ERC grant recipients within panel sets, our findings indicate that the majority of panellist-recipients had already received an ERC grant prior to their panel appointment. Specifically, 166 panellists were awarded grants before their panel service, whereas 46 were awarded grants following their tenure on the panels.

Step 2: Sampling

To achieve a target pool of interviewees, we conducted multiple rounds of stratified random sampling of panellists based on predefined variables of interest (see Table 1). Our goal was to capture diverse experiences from all six panels, aiming to select four interviewees from each. To reflect varying levels of involvement, we aimed for a targeted sample of interviewees consisting of a chair, a one-time panellist, a two-time panellist, and a panellist with three-or-more-time participation. Additionally, we ensured that at least one interviewee was a panellist-recipient of an ERC grant. This selection process yielded a total of 24 interviewees.

In the first round of our selection, we conducted three iterations of sampling to produce a pool of 72 panellists, which we then evaluated based on post-sampling variables. This finalised list formed the base for interview invitations. The random selection process involved grouping panellists by panel membership and participation frequency. Within each SH, Panellists were categorised into four groups: those who had served as chair and those who had participated once, twice or more than twice. These categories were further divided based on whether the panellists had received an ERC grant. Sampling was conducted as follows for each panel: first, we randomly selected, without replacement, one panellist-recipient and assigned them to one of the four slots based on their status as a chair or their frequency of participation. For the remaining three slots, we sampled from the non-recipient pool according to attendance frequency. This process was repeated three times for each panel, resulting in a target pool of 72 potential interview candidates.

Step 3: Post-Sampling assessment

We examined the list of 72 panellists in the target pool across three post-sampling variables of interest: gender, methodological preference, and grantee-panellist sequence (see Table 1). For gender, we relied on pronouns used in the scholars' institutional profiles and curricula vitae. '*Methodological preference*' was determined by reviewing recent publications to categorise each panellist's preference as either quantitative or qualitative. To minimise biases and classification errors, two authors conducted the identification process independently and concurrently, with results later cross-verified. For the variable '*grantee vis a vis panellist position*,' we ensured representation of both 'grantee-first' and 'panellist-first' panellists within the target pool. The primary objective of this post-sampling check was to ensure that the target pool encompassed panellists with diverse experiences based on gender and academic orientation.

Step 4: Contact and the collection of interviews

We gathered publicly available information on the panellists' current institutional affiliations and, where accessible, their curricula vitae. The target pool of 72 panellists was divided into two groups for sending invitations to manage email volume. For the initial round, we randomly selected five panellists from each of the six panels, resulting in a list of 30 contacts. Follow-up emails were sent to the non-respondents at the end of the second week. In the second round, we targeted panellists not contacted in the first group, along with those from whom we had received rejections in response to the initial email.

Table 2. Final matrix of the target pool (source: authors).

Panels	Chair	Participation Frequency			
		Three-or-More	Two	One	
SH1	2	None	None	1	3
SH2	1	1	1	2	5
SH3	None	2	2	1	5
SH4	1	None	2	1	4
SH5	2	1	1	1	5
SH6	2	None	1	None	3
	8	3	8	6	25

To gain better insight into the interview questions, we conducted five pilot interviews. Subsequent interviews were planned iteratively, with ongoing interview collection and initial coding informing further sampling and refinement of the interview guide. Given the low response rate, ultimately, we conducted the selections across eight rounds: initially for a list of 72 panellists, followed by a list of 48, and finally another list of 72. In each round, only those from unrepresented categories – those not previously interviewed – were contacted. Throughout the process, we maintained flexibility in our approach to select interviewees. For instance, if an interview raised a topic requiring insight from other perspectives within the same panel, we subsequently contacted the other panel members. In total, invitations were sent to 123 panellists.

Six months after initiating contacts with potential interviewees, we conducted 25 interviews. The final distribution of interviewees across the six SH panels is detailed in Table 2. As illustrated, all but six positions from the initial target pool matrix were filled. Of the participants, 12 were women and 13 were men (See Supplemental Figure 4). Among the informants, 4 were grantees: 3 had received grants before their panel appointments, and 1 was awarded two grants, one of them before and one after serving on an SH panel.

Conclusion

Elite and expert interviewing in qualitative research often relies on ad-hoc approaches to non-probability sampling techniques such as snowballing. However, when the overall population of potential interviewees is known and meaningful distinctions within the group are discernible, a more systematic approach, such as randomised sampling, proves not only feasible but also advantageous. This article has outlined a practical framework for implementing such an approach, emphasising its benefits.

We have argued that, in these contexts, stratified random sampling offers three key advantages over snowball sampling. First, through its systematic approach to informant recruitment, it provides valuable insights into the overall population under study. Second, it facilitates the timely preparation of a diverse contact list. Third, it enables researchers to assess the extent to which their interviews allow them to capture the diversity of perspectives crucial to their research focus. In our study of evaluative culture within academia, this method ensured diversity of experiences across various evaluative panels and a range of expert perspectives with different academic orientations, roles on panels and extent of experience, all of which were essential to our analysis.

This article has detailed the application of an informed, multi-layered sampling strategy, which not only guided the selection process but also provided a framework for monitoring inclusivity and minimising potential bias in recruitment. Furthermore, by observing the ERC's panellist recruitment patterns and structural characteristics, we have established a valuable contextual foundation for analysing our interview data.

Notes

1. The project is funded by the European Commission under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) program; see <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101066800>
2. While the former is predominantly discussed in the European context and the latter in the Anglo-American context, the two approaches are almost identical in terms of methodology and methods (Littig, 2009).
3. problem-centered expert interview, proposed by Döringer (2021), is a dialogic-discursive method which combines theory-generating with problem-centered expert interview.
4. Although Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS) (Heckathorn, 1997) has been suggested as offering more 'reliable' sampling through the expansion of the number of waves in the recruitment of informants, the problem of time and resource limitations remains unaddressed.
5. The overall number of panels has expanded slightly over the years. We analysed six panels since we looked at the ERC's SH panel sets from 2010 to 2020.
6. The norms, or 'customary rules of deliberation' of the ERC and research funding peer review more generally, to which panellists are expected to adhere, have been described in detail in the literature (Lamont, 2009; Luukkonen, 2012).
7. This information is conveyed through written reports, as well as informally, as these panelists are trusted colleagues of Scientific Council members. It worth mentioning that although the process is rather complex, with its power in shaping the panel sets, ultimately the funding body plays an essential role in the evaluation process.
8. For example, the 'ERC Scientific Council Gender Equality Plan 2021–2027' declares a relevant 'medium-term goal,' namely, 'to achieve gender balance in each ERC evaluation panel as well as among the panel chairs' (ERC, 2020, p. 4).
9. The data were retrieved from the following URL: <https://erc.europa.eu/>. Since then, this website has been relaunched and the data relocated. The original PDF files are saved in the data storage of the research project at Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS). The underlying text of the PDF files was formatted such that copying and pasting resulted in a cumbersome workflow; instead, the built-in macOS OCR software was used on PNG screenshots of the data.
10. See <https://github.com/nijibabalu/stringdist>
11. There is also a good share of panellists who occur only once in our data. However, this result is most likely skewed since we do not regard the panel sets from before 2010 - which means that at least a few of those who have been 'singletons' in our calculation have indeed been panellists at least once before. The same, obviously, is true for those who appear as 'singletons' in the panel sets of the later years; some of them, at least, are most likely serving another round in years beyond the time scope of our analysis.

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