

Snowball Sampling Recruitment Guidelines

Snowball sampling is a recruitment technique that involves asking current research participants to help identify other potential participants (i.e. referrals).

There are two preferred ways this can be done:

1) Potential Participants Contacted by previous Participants not Researcher: Researchers can ask current participants to tell other people about the study. If interested, these people contact the researcher directly.

2) Researcher contacts Potential Participants: Researchers can ask current participants to provide the names and contact information of people they think might be interested. Researchers then contact these people directly.

Each of these involve different ethical issues, described in more detail, that researchers must consider in their application.

IMPORTANT POINTS TO CONSIDER:

- ✓ Current participants cannot receive any compensation for providing referrals, or be offered any incentives to provide referrals.
- ✓ Current participants MUST NOT be required to refer others or incur any penalty for not referring other participants.

1) Potential Participants Contacted by previous Participants not Researcher: This form of snowball sampling involves asking current participants to mention the study to people whom they think might be interested in participating (i.e., referrals). Researchers can assist by providing current participants with a short description of the study and their contact information. Interested referrals can contact the researcher directly. Having current participants provide referrals' names directly to the researcher may violate referrals' privacy. For example, if participants were to be recruited based on sensitive criteria, such as an illness, asking current participants to refer others may reveal confidential information about these people and leave the potential participant feeling unsure to very concerned about contact from a researcher without any warning. This can be avoided by having current participants mention the study directly to referrals, who can then contact the researcher if interested.

Note that recruiting in this manner may raise other ethical issues. For example, if current participants have some degree of power over referrals, such as an employer-employee relationship, then asking current participants to mention the research to others may raise issues of undue influence.

Researchers are encouraged to think through the ethical issues that are relevant to their specific situation and to explain, in their application, how their chosen option handles these issues.

If this type of snowball recruitment is used, researchers must include the materials and/or instructions (e.g., recruitment script and researcher contact information) that they will be providing to participants within their ethics application.

Example Script to Handout to Potential Participants

"My name is [name] and I am a researcher from Queen's University/Insert Affiliation. My research supervisor is [name] from Queen's University/Insert Affiliation. I am conducting a research study about [insert brief summary in plain language]. If you are interested in learning more please contact me [insert contact information]."

2) Researcher contacts Potential Participants: This form of snowball sampling involves asking current participants to provide the names and contact information of referrals so that researchers can contact them directly. Typically, this is the more useful option for researchers. However, it can be problematic when the recruitment criteria involves sensitive information, possibly breaching referrals' privacy, or when referrals are likely to be sensitive about being contacted directly (e.g., police, military, etc.). In such cases, current participants need to obtain referrals' permission to provide their contact information to researchers.

It may be permissible for current participants to not seek prior permission of referrals when the risks of creating recruitment discomfort are very low. Researchers need to justify this type of concern in their application.

At a minimum, researchers must indicate where they obtained referrals' contact information from (consistent with any recruitment that involves contacting participants directly) when contacting referrals. This means revealing the participant's identity to those whose names they provide. The participants must consent to this (e.g., it must be described in the LOI and a check box to indicate "yes, you may reveal my identity to those participants I have referred"). In certain situations, there may be ethical reasons not to reveal this information. Researchers need to justify this in their application. If this type of snowball recruitment is used, the researcher needs to include the **recruitment script** for such referrals in the ethics application.

Example Script for Current Participants

"Thank you for participating in my research study titled [study title]. Would you be willing to pass along the name and contact information of any friend/family/co-worker who may be interested in participating? There is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information. We will be letting potential participants whom you refer know that you were the source of the referral. You also have the right to request that you are given time to notify the potential participants prior to us contacting them. YES NO."

Example Script for Potential Participants

"My name is [name] and I am a researcher from Queen's University/Insert Affiliation. My research supervisor is [name] from Queen's University/Insert Affiliation. Your name/contact information was passed along to me by [participant name/list serve]. It was suggested that you may be interested in participating in my research study. Do you have time to hear about my study now, or to set up a time to discuss this further in the near future? YES NO"