**Ethical Guidelines for Snowball Sampling**

**What is snowball sampling?**

Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method where research participants are asked to recruit or refer other participants for a research project. Researchers then use their own judgement to choose participants.

**Why is snowball sampling used?**

With some research questions, participants are difficult to find (e.g., cheating on exams, drug use) or the population may be extremely small. In these cases, those study participants that have been recruited are more likely to know other people in the same situation, so are invited to pass study information along.

**Ways to use snowball sampling**

There are usually two preferred ways

1. Potential participants can be contacted by current participants, not the researcher. With this method, researchers recruit a current participant and ask them to tell other people about the study. If interested, these people contact the researcher directly.
2. Current participants provide the researcher with names and contact information of people they think might be interested and then the researcher contacts these people directly.

Each has its own different ethical issues that need to be considered.

**IMPORTANT POINTS TO CONSIDER FOR EITHER METHOD:**

* 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.
* Current participants may not fully understand the criteria for inclusion and/or exclusion so may refer ineligible participants.
* Think through the ethical issues described below that are relevant to your specific situation and explain, in the application, how your chosen option handles these issues. The method that minimizes risk is the preferred choice.

1. **Potential participants contacted by current participants**

This form of snowball sampling involves asking current participants to assist the researcher in identifying other potential participants. The researcher would provide a short description of the study and their contact information and anyone interested would contact the researcher directly. The protocol for using this method must be justified in the REB application in the context of the study and the target population.

**Ethical Issues to Note:**

1. If a current participant is in a position of authority or commanding influence (especially where possible sanctions are involved) over the referred person, this method is not recommended. While, a continuum of influencing factors may exist, it is impossible to know exactly where justifiable persuasion ends and undue influence begins. For example, if a respected person in the community (e.g., Elder) or employer asks others.
2. If the current participant was recruited through a poster/brochure/email/social media poster, the researcher could encourage participants to pass the information on to others who may be interested or eligible (taking into consider point a). Interested prospective participants could then contact the researcher for more information. If, however, social media is used, in the consent form, discourage individuals from reposting, liking, or tagging people and to the extent possible monitor the accounts to see that such posts or tags are removed. Encourage direct messaging to the researcher.
3. The researcher must include the materials and/or instructions (e.g., recruitment script and researcher contact information) that they will be providing to participants within the REB application.

**Example scripts to include on the Consent Form and/or Recruitment material.**

If you know other individuals that may be interested in participating in this research and are willing to contact them, I would appreciate it if you would send them the following script. There is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information.

My name is [insert name] and I am a researcher from the Faculty/Department at the University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. My research supervisor is [insert name] also from the University of Regina. I am conducting a research study about [insert brief summary in plain language]. If you are interested in learning more, please contact me at [contact information]. However, because email is not a secure form of communication, please just use [word/phrase] in the subject line to protect your anonymity.

If you know other individuals that may be interested in participating in this research, we encourage you to forward this email/poster/brochure or privately send this post to them. Please do not repost, like, or tag this post as then people may believe you have participated in the study and your anonymity is compromised. There is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide this information. Please direct message me if you would like to participate in the study.

1. **Current participants provide the researcher with names and contact information**

This form of snowball sampling involves asking current participants to provide the name and contact information of referrals which the researcher then contacts directly. The researcher then basically “cold calls” the potential participants to invite them to become involved in the study. The protocol for using this method must be justified in the REB application in the context of the study and the target population.

**Ethical Issues to Note:**

1. Direct referral to the researcher may violate referrals’ privacy. For example, if the participant was being recruited based on sensitive criteria (e.g., illness, extramarital affair), then referral would reveal confidential information that the individual would likely prefer not be known. In these cases, current participants would need to obtain the referrals’ permission to provide their contact information to the researcher.
2. In situations where the risks of creating referrals’ discomfort is very low or where referrals’ contact information may be publicly available, it may be permissible to not obtain prior consent to provide information. Researchers need to justify this procedure in their REB application.
3. At a minimum, when contacting new participants researchers must indicate from where they obtained the referrals’ contact information. Therefore, current participants’ identity will be provided to new participants and the current participant must consent to this. If there are reasons not to reveal this information, the researcher must justify it in their application.
4. In the REB application, the researcher must include
   1. the recruitment script to new participants (see below)
   2. the steps you will take to recruit these new participants
   3. explicit statements on the current participants’ consent form stating:
      1. You may reveal my identity to those participants I have referred. Yes/No.
      2. You may contact the referral immediately. Yes/No
      3. You may contact the referral after 7 days. Yes/No

**Example Script to include in the Consent Form and/or Recruitment material.**

If you know other individuals that may be interested in participating in this research, would you be willing to pass along their names and contact information? There is no obligation for you to pass along this information, and there will be no penalty if you do not provide it. We would let 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.

**Example Script for Potential Participants**

My name is [insert name] and I am a researcher from the Faculty/Department of XX at the University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. My research supervisor is [insert name] also from the University of Regina. Your name/contact information was passed along to me by [current participant name]. It was suggested that you may be interested in participating in my research study. The study is about [insert brief summary in plain language]. If you are interested in learning more, please contact me at [contact information]. However, because email is not a secure form of communication, please just use [word/phrase] in the subject line to protect your anonymity.

**Sources:**

Boise State Office of Research Compliance. <https://www.boisestate.edu/research-compliance/irb/guidance/guidelines-for-investigators-using-snowball-sampling-recruitment-methods/>

Glen, S. “Snowball Sampling: Definition, Advantages and Disadvantages” From StatisticsHowTo.com: Elementary Statistics for the rest of us! <https://www.statisticshowto.com/probability-and-statistics/statistics-definitions/snowball-sampling/>

Queen’s University Snowball Sampling Recruitment Guidelines. https://www.queensu.ca/vpr/sites/vprwww/files/uploaded\_files/Ethics/HSREB-guidelines/Snowball%20Sampling%20Recruitment%20Guidelines%20Final%202019MAR18.pdf