



## Qualitative Sampling Techniques: From Practice to Theory

Imran Hussain<sup>\*a</sup>

a. Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Lahore, Pakistan

### ARTICLE INFO

**Received:**

August 05, 2025

**Revision Received:**

August 19, 2025

**Accepted:**

September 13, 2025

**Available Online:**

September 26, 2025

**Keywords:**

Qualitative research,  
methodological framework,  
sampling techniques,  
convenience sampling,  
snowball sampling,  
purposive sampling,  
theoretical sampling

### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the vital role of sampling in qualitative research, highlighting how methodological decisions influence the credibility and depth of findings. It begins with an overview of sampling in qualitative studies before discussing four main methods: convenience sampling, purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and theoretical sampling. Each method is evaluated based on its rationale, use, advantages, and drawbacks. Convenience sampling is accessible but may introduce bias; purposive sampling depends on researcher judgment to select meaningful cases; snowball sampling facilitates access to hidden groups through participant networks; and theoretical sampling, based on grounded theory, promotes conceptual development via iterative data collection. By illustrating these approaches from practical to theoretical perspectives, the paper shows the dynamic relationship between method choice and research aims. The discussion concludes with a summary that integrates insights from all methods, providing a framework for aligning sampling techniques with epistemological positions and research design. Ultimately, the study highlights that careful sampling is not just a procedural step but a key methodological requirement for producing rigorous and meaningful qualitative research.

### 1. Introduction

Sampling is a process of selecting elements or population for research purpose. It is an essential component of a research study because it is not possible to study the whole population in order to analyze the issue in question. It is meant to study or survey a proportion of a population rather than studying the whole population (Ellis, 2020). Furthermore, it is meant to demonstrate the representation of the population being sampled for that qualitative study. Results drawn from sampled population can be generalized to broader level, which is the essence of evidence based findings (Murad et al., 2018). In this way, sampling in qualitative research is intended to figure out the individuals who have either interests or experiences of the issue under consideration. In qualitative study, researcher makes use of sampling choice in order to have deep insights and comprehension of what is being studied.

Selecting a suitable sampling mechanism is an imperative decision on the part of a researcher to collect data in a research study. Preference of any sampling technique is a key as far as the accuracy and reliability of that research's findings are concerned. Likewise, the choice of sampling has a deep-rooted impact on the generalizability of that research outcome. Therefore, it is deemed an essential to ponder on the possible impacts of sampling technique on bias, diversity and generalizability while choosing any form of sampling for research study. Suitable choice of sampling leads to appropriate selection of research method

\* Correspondence to: Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Lahore, Pakistan

E-mail address: [imranhoseyn@gmail.com](mailto:imranhoseyn@gmail.com) (I. Hussain)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5950-843X>



to analyze the research questions in a befitting manner. Consequently, it will ensure the reliability and validity of the research findings.

## **2. Types of Sampling in Qualitative Research**

The prime objective of utilizing sampling is to choose a suitable elements or population so that the essence of study can be amply researched or analyzed. In any form of research sampling is a key feature and to qualitative research is no exception. Unsuitable or improper sampling leads to inappropriate procedures in a study and hence the outcomes of the study are adversely affected (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013, p. 124). There are numerous procedures that can be followed in sampling for qualitative research method, which are unlike the procedures being adopted in quantitative studies. The sampling mechanism in qualitative research is termed as non-probability sampling. In these types of sampling, a researcher only implied sampling technique to a specific population to explore a specific topic or issue in which the total population is either unavailable or unknown (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013). There are four major types of sampling in qualitative or non-probability sampling.

### **2.1. Convenience Sampling**

It is the most widely used form of sampling in a qualitative research in which people or population are invited to be a part of study because of their availability in terms of convenience. Convenience can be of willingness, time, location or reachability. This type of sampling is convenient, fast and easy to have a specific size of population needed for a qualitative research. As there is an ease of access and location in convenience sampling, this makes it inexpensive for the researcher. But it must be kept in view that utility of convenience sampling must be kept in view as primary focus of attention instead of its low cost and convenience. That is why convenience sampling is neither strategic nor purposive (Patton, 2015). It is also referred to as accidental sampling or haphazard sampling, as it is consisted of what is readily available. This type of sampling mechanism is highly fruitful in case of exploratory research (Creswell, 2017).

According to Schreier (2018) this type of sampling is so convenient and easy that often researchers asked their fellows to be part of sample and inculcation of online survey has made this form of sampling even simpler and convenient. It is also widely used in journalism where journalists or interviewer are in quest of easy and convenient population of their interest, especially in interview which are conducted on the roadside or in the park on short or without any prior notice. However, it is significant to avoid generalization of the findings based on convenience sampling. When there is a limitation in terms of time and money in any qualitative research, this type of sampling is a “go-to method” to address that limitation. But it is imperative to keep in view that it must not undermine the quality or discredit findings.

Convenience sampling is needed to be used as a feasible mean to conduct study with zero compromise on quality. Apart from the advantages of this type of sampling, there are certain limitations with regard to convenience sampling. It may either result in under-representation or over presentation of a specific group within a particular population. In this way, there is a possibility that the sample is not representative of the population being studied on a specific topic or issue. It may put limitation on researchers at one hand and put hurdle in generalization of findings of that study to a wider spectrum on the other hand (Creswell, 2017). Another limitation of convenience sampling is that it often results in low credibility of the study due to over or under-representation of the sample population.

### **2.2. Purposive Sampling**

It is also mostly utilized form of sampling in qualitative research in which participants or population keeping in view pre-defined pattern or criteria are aligned to research objectives. It is also termed as “judgmental sampling”. This form of sampling is good for in depth study or analysis because sample size is consisted of the participants who possessed the required knowledge or insights the researcher is looking for in a specific study (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013, p. 125). It is a form of sampling which is generally known as purposeful sampling because in this sampling mechanism sample consisted of rich information is selected by the researcher of a qualitative study for in depth study of the objectives or issue in view (Shaheen et al., 2016). Patton (2015) pointed out as many as 16 strategies to extract information rich cases, which refers towards the complex nature of sampling in qualitative research.

Purposive sampling is consisted of quota and maximum variation sampling. In quota sampling, the researcher selects the size of sample along with the traits he or she wants the population to possess. The population is sampled in quota sampling keeping in view the age, gender, role, ideology and experiences of the participants. It is more specific as compare to general sampling because in quota sampling size and proportion of sample is selected as per prescribed quota. Whereas, maximum variation sample, is meant to ensure the full range of the phenomena being presented in that study. In this form of sampling focus is put either on the people i.e. first, third, last; time periods i.e. 3 weeks, 6 months, 1 year or context i.e. community like school, park or hospital (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013, p. 125).

As indicated above that purposive sample is also known as judgmental sampling, so it is more likely to be prone towards bias. It is because here the selection of sample is wholly dependent on researchers' judgment, which is subjective. So, purposive sample contains high risk factor in terms of observer bias. At times, it is also difficult for the researcher to defend the nature of representation in purposive sampling. There is also a risk that participants of purposive sampling might manipulate the data to either draw a desired outcome or unwanted results. In addition, this strategy might be ineffective for a larger population, but can be very effective when sample size is limited or small. In case of larger population, incorrect assumptions are most likely to be produced. With a view to minimize the limitation, it is essential for the researcher to ensure the validity and reliability of the data being collected for purposive sampling.

### **2.3. Snowball Sampling**

It is also known as "chain referral" and "networking" sampling because it is carried out when the researcher in a qualitative study assembles data or information from one or few participants and on the recommendation of those people put it over to others people who might be their relatives, friends or contact people. It is based on the chain that people know and locate other participants who are similar to them. Furthermore, it is often utilized for hard to locate population in a qualitative research. This form of sampling is highly beneficial in issues regarding sensitive and personal matters (Heckathorn, 2011). In this form of sampling, an extensive and detailed data can be obtained from participants with identical interests and experiences within a single network of participants.

This type of sampling is convenient and useful in a case where the population of the study represents either marginalized or stigmatized individuals, i.e. drinkers, prostitutes or AIDS/HIV sufferers. In such case, "hidden population" is coined because sample population is not available or easily accessible through other sampling strategies (Thorogood & Green, 2009). This type of sampling is reliant on the identification or location of "information-rich key informants" which is a key in chain referral sampling as the size of snowball manifolds when the "information-rich" cases are accumulated through "recommended informants". It is an unconventional sort of sampling works unlike other conventional modes of data collection. In addition, it is also fruitful strategy to sample when the researcher area of interest is relevant with a population or group of participants which are of rare nature.

However, there is a major limitation with regard to this form of sampling is that at a time the research committee may avoid to grant permission for snowball sampling due to personal concerns and privacy issues. Even stigmatized individuals may refuse to take part in such sampling. In addition, sampling from such individuals is in risk of incorrect and inconsistent assumptions. Another major limitation with regard to snowball sampling is that if the researcher is involved in a sensitive topic with regard to legal, moral, social issue and doesn't know or have contact with relevant stigmatized or marginalized persons it would be hard rather impossible to initiate the chain of snowball. Another prime limitation of snowball sampling is that the results or findings being drawn based on this form of sampling don't have the potential of broader generalization (Flick, 2009).

### **2.4. Theoretical Sampling**

It is a form of sampling that is extensively being utilized by researchers in qualitative studies to collect data from a population to generate theory. In order to draw similarities and distinctions among cases of similar nature, this sort of sampling is utilized. In such selected cases, the study moves from small scale i.e. homogeneous towards large scale i.e. heterogeneous (Creswell, 2017). It is a mechanism of data collection in order to formulate a theory. It is something that acts as an interrelation between data collection and data analysis. This process is directed by some conceptual grounds, and ultimately that process of research leads to emergence of theory (Gray, 2004). This sort of sampling is common among studies based on grounded theory, as this type of sampling was formulated in the context of grounded theory.

In this type of sampling, the researcher selects participants whom he or she considers as the agent who can maximize his or her chance of assembling data on the issue being studied. The prime advantage of utilizing this type of sampling is that it assists the researcher to collect, analyze and codes the assembled data to analyzed what sort of data is required or needed next to move forward on the issue being researched (Shaheen et al., 2016). Theoretical sampling is consumed in sequential order along with data analysis, as previous data analysis steers the researcher to analyze what sort of data is need to be collected next. In such cases, it is significant to keep in view that participants or population selected initially are based on purposive or convenience mode of sampling (Utriainen et al., 2009).

The usage of this mechanism of sampling is essential when the researcher wants to sketch out a new theory, as it has the potential to bring forth innovation in research. It is deemed to be more flexible as compare to other form of sampling as there are no "static" formula for the population being sampled (Schreier, 2018). As regard the limitation of this sampling technique is concerned, it is not suitable for inexperience and inefficient researcher because to formulate a new theory is a complex and challenging process which requires due consideration and expertise. It consists of highly systemic process which requires time, resources and certain level of efficiency to proceed. Another limitation of this sampling technique is that it is a time-consuming activity and requires lots of passion to go along with the complexities of the process.

### 3. Conclusion

There are numerous sampling techniques available to collect data from sample population in a qualitative research. Convenience, purposive, snowballs and theoretical samplings are the broader types of qualitative sampling. In addition, subtypes within these broad types of sampling are also there in qualitative research. Each of these sampling techniques has its own strengths and limitations. For instance, purposive sampling enables a researcher to have access to more specific and target sample for study. But as this type of sampling lacks diversity of the participants, so it is more subject to bias. On the other hand, convenience sampling can ensure a more diverse sample with regard to background and demographics. But it is more prone towards bias because it is based on the principle of convenient and available sample which is readily accessible or willing to take part in the study. Likewise, snowball sampling is a good idea to assemble data from hard to access participants or population. But this form of sampling is highly subject to lack of diversity, as participants are selected on the recommendation of initially selected participants in a chain or network. Theoretical sampling can enable a researcher to refine his or her research question and theoretical framework because of emerging data. But the limitation in theoretical sampling is that it is highly time-taking and intensive resources are required for that.

### References

- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.
- Ellis, P. (2018). *Understanding Research for Nursing Students* (4th edn). Sage.
- Flick, U. (2009). *An Introduction To Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications (4th ed.). London: Sage Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/978-1-84787-323-1>
- Gray, D. E. (2004). *Doing Research in the Real World*. London: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Hussain, I., Waqas, M., & Miran, G. (2025). Echoing Global Voices: Fostering Global Citizenship through English Language Teaching in Pakistan. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)*, 8(3), 986-995.
- Hussain, I., Rahat, R., & Parveen, T. (2024). Empowering Minds, Transforming Futures: Advancing Multiple Intelligences through English Language Teaching in Pakistan. *International Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 3(1), 776-790.
- Heckathorn, D. D. (2011). Comment: Snowball versus respondent-driven sampling. *Sociological methodology*, 41(1), 355-366.
- Hussain, I., Babar, M. N., & Arfat, M. Y. (2025). Revitalizing TESOL in Pakistan: Empowering English language teachers through 21st century multiliteracies for global impact. *Pakistan Journal of Social Science Review*, 4(4), 753-770.
- Hussain, I., Babar, M. N., & Arshad, M. (2025). Decoding Language Discourse: Unlocking Digital and Media Literacy among English Language Learners in Pakistan. *Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review*, 3(3), 519-534.
- Lopez, V., & Whitehead, D. (2013). Sampling data and data collection in qualitative research. *Nursing & midwifery research: Methods and appraisal for evidence-based practice*, 123, 140.
- Murad, M. H., Katabi, A., Benkhadra, R., & Montori, V. M. (2018). External validity, generalisability, applicability and directness: a brief primer. *BMJ evidence-based medicine*, 23(1), 17.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schreier, M. (2018). Sampling and Generalization In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection* (pp. 84---98). London, Sage Publications, Inc.
- Shaheen, M., Gupta, R., & Kumar, Y. L. N. (2016). Exploring Dimensions of Teachers' OCB from Stakeholder's Perspective: A Study in India. *Qualitative Report*, 21(6), 1095-1117.
- Shaheen, M., Gupta, R., & Kumar, Y. L. N. (2016). Exploring Dimensions of Teachers' OCB from Stakeholder's Perspective: A Study in India. *Qualitative Report*, 21(6), 1095-1117.
- Thorogood, N., & Green, J. (2018). Qualitative methods for health research. *Qualitative methods for health research*, 1-440.
- Utriainen, K., Kyngäs, H., & Nikkilä, J. (2009). Well-being at work among ageing hospital nurses in Northern Finland: a grounded theory study. *International Journal of Circumpolar Health*, 68(2), 145-157.