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## Sampling through the lens of QRPs

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### ABSTRACT

From an ethical standpoint, it is important that we ensure that our sampling procedures allow us to make generalizations about the populations we wish to represent. In this commentary, we agree with the perspective offered by Kim and Chen (2025), though we would also suggest that we broaden their call to action into a larger consideration of the researcher decisions that scholars make when conducting research. We are particularly interested in the role played by what has been termed questionable research practices (QRPs), that is, actions that fall somewhere between typically agreed upon research actions on the one side and research misconduct on the other.

The commentary by Kim and Chen (2025) offers a highly useful exploration into the field's need to consider the recruitment of participants for online experiments. From an ethical standpoint, it is important that we ensure that our sampling procedures allow us to make generalizations about the populations we wish to represent. In this commentary, we do not argue against the authors' perspective but instead, suggest that we broaden their call to action into a larger consideration of the researcher decisions that scholars make when conducting research. We are particularly interested in the role played by what has been termed questionable research practices (QRPs), that is, actions that fall somewhere between typically agreed upon research actions on one side and research misconduct on the other.

There are multiple decisions that must be made throughout the course of any research project. Some are larger in scale such as considering what we want to study, who we want to include in that study, and how we will collect that data. We also must consider which findings to include in a publication, which journals or other venues we want to publish and present the research, and so much more. While the field has witnessed increased discussions related to research ethics in recent years (Yaw et al, 2023), there has been limited consideration related to the daily decisions that go into conducting research. Recent work (see Isbell et al, 2022; Larsson et al, 2023; Plonsky, Larsson et al, 2024) has attempted to bridge our understanding of researcher decisions through the lens of QRPs. QRPs are the questionable, though not explicitly wrong or negative, decision points that researchers are likely to face. QRPs tend to live in a grey zone that touches all areas of research (see Plonsky, Larsson et al, 2024 for a taxonomy of QRPs). However, Plonsky, Brown et al (2024) and Sterling et al (2025) have discussed how the context of a research project impacts the acceptance of QRPs by researchers. Both studies also show that study quality and, in particular, the ethical dimensions to quality are not monolithic. More specifically, scholars in this area argue that researcher decisions must be understood within the specific context of a study. While a simple 'good' versus 'bad' research decision taxonomy might be desired, the truth is that we must consider the multifaceted context in which a given piece of research is conducted.

Kim and Chen's discussion of online participant recruitment efforts is a prime example of the type of decision that scholars need to

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make and how context will often dictate which choice is seen as optimal. Researchers in the social sciences cannot be expected to create a sample that is representative of all humans. We are constrained in time, resources, and other practicalities. Instead, a research team creates the best sampling frame within their means and one that achieves the goal of the given research project while minimizing threats to internal and external validity. At the same time, there is no single best form of sampling that will work for all projects and so scholars must be transparent in reporting their sampling decisions. Some scholars might be looking for a ‘truth’ in their research and feel that having a diverse and large sample will help reduce bias and allow them to better generalize their claims to a broader population. Other projects purposefully investigate outlying cases or are interested in hyper-local contexts as is often the case in action research projects.

Populations often described as ‘WEIRD’ are frequently mentioned in a negative light but if a researcher’s goal is to improve language education at the university level in the USA, then WEIRD college students are probably the target population and thus the appropriate group to sample from. By contrast, if the goal is to study second language acquisition more broadly, then WEIRD college students merely make up a small proportion of the world’s language learners. The point here is that using WEIRD populations, sampling extreme cases, or having limited generalizability is not an unethical choice per se, but depending on the research goal, deciding to use these populations might be appropriate or potentially be questionable. Put differently, for some projects, a choice might be seen as the correct one to make, but that will not be true for all research. As Kim and Chen point out in their section on Constraints on Generality, one issue that might surface is generalizing beyond the capacity of a particular sample. There are limitations to claiming that a small, convenient sample is representative of all language learners, just as there are limitations to assuming that large data pools are generalizable to an individual classroom.

Decisions often become questionable when intent is considered. It might be considered questionable if a research team collects data from students simply because they are geographically close or because they are an ‘easy’ group to obtain data from. On the other hand, using MTurk simply because it is easier than visiting dozens of classrooms and asking for volunteers, is also potentially questionable. The decision to recruit from classrooms versus online or crowdsourced sampling should be weighed against other considerations such as the level of control needed over screening participants, the sensitivity required of equipment, the desired sample size, the need to access participants from diverse backgrounds, and more. In the end, we must decide on who, where, and how we recruit participants. Moreover, some of these choices may present a tension between practicality and data quality, thus introducing an ethical element to our design and procedures. There is also a need for transparency in reporting not only which decisions were made in sampling but also the reason why those decisions were made. Providing this information can help readers understand which particular populations were being sampled and improve generalizability of results. None of these choices are inherently the correct one to make and we will need to consider the context and goals of each project.

To conclude, there is rarely a single ‘correct’ choice in research. A decision might work well for one project but not be the correct fit for another one. Of course we should not fabricate data, we should not lock people in a room until they agree to participate, and so on. These cases are not merely ‘questionable’, they are research misconduct. QRPs emerge from decision points where the outcome is questionable. Sharing calls to participate in a study more broadly or ensuring diverse populations are utilized in a sample might be important for some studies while less necessary in others. Equipping scholars with the tools to make correct choices in the context and in the moment is an important endeavor to consider (see [Yaw et al, forthcoming](#)). The Kim and Chen article does a commendable job at promoting one form of data sampling while working through some of the challenges associated with making that decision. Whether scholars opt to utilize online platforms or not, the goal should be to consider what is the best action or decision that can be made for their particular project. Scholars considering these issues in their future research will help support quality decision making when QRPs are faced.

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None.

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