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Recruiting & Sustaining Sample Populations Over Time: Possibilities and Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Recruiting and sustaining a sample over time brings with it particular challenges (Weller, 2010), and has long been seen as a critical aspect of large-scale quantitative longitudinal panel surveys. While those working cross-sectionally need only secure one research meeting between the participant and researcher, in longitudinal approaches it is necessary to stretch and sustain this engagement over time. When working with comparatively small sample sizes – as is so often the case in Qualitative Longitudinal (QL) research – the risks around 'attrition' or sample maintenance inevitably become greater, given the potential impact of even a relatively small number of interviewees choosing not to participate in subsequent waves of data generation.

Given the central importance of developing effective approaches to sample recruitment and maintenance, this guide focuses on this aspect of the research process. Practical suggestions and advice are blended with reflexive considerations of particular dilemmas and issues that require consideration in this context. Drawing on experience of conducting QL research, this guide demonstrates that the 'problem' of attrition is better reconsidered as the 'challenge' of developing effective strategies for sustaining research relationships over time – a challenge which brings with it possibilities for developing richer and more rewarding research interactions. As Neale *et al* argue: "The basic concern with sample maintenance in longitudinal research may be reframed...in terms of maintaining long term relationships, with an acknowledgement that 'walking alongside' people as their lives unfold inevitably touches the lives of both participants and researchers". (2012:5).

KEY POINTS

- There are particular challenges around recruiting and sustaining a sample in QL research.

- Working with gatekeeper organisations can be particularly effective when recruiting a sample of hard-to-reach individuals.

- In developing effective relationships over time, it is important to look at processes for maintaining contact and how best to balance sustained contact with over-involvement.

- It is valuable to try to develop relationships of trust and reciprocity between researcher(s) and participants.

- Building in aspects of participatory practice can help sustain research participants' engagement over time.

- Ethical issues can be heightened in QL research. Regarding sample maintenance, opportunities for voluntary withdrawal should always be prioritised even if this means some attrition.

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BACKGROUND

In exploring issues around recruiting and sustaining samples in QL research, this guide builds on insights developed from ongoing doctoral research into the lived experiences of welfare reform. This research explores how people experience and respond to changes in benefit provision and eligibility by 'walking alongside' a small sample of purposively selected individuals whose benefits are undergoing change(s). Given a political context of widespread welfare residualisation and reform, it is particularly important to explore the realities of life on benefits with a focus on how this lived experience changes as reforms take effect.

Adopting a prospective research design, a small sample of 22 participants was initially interviewed in the summer of 2011. From this initial sample, a smaller sub-sample of 14 participants was elected to follow longitudinally on the basis of those with experiences of most interest to the research project's central focus. These 14 participants will be interviewed on three occasions between October 2011 and December 2012.

Participants include young unemployed jobseekers affected by the tightening of the welfare conditionality regime; lone parents who are about to be transferred off Income Support and onto Jobseeker's Allowance; and disabled people being migrated from Incapacity Benefit onto the new Employment and Support Allowance.

The research also incorporates some participatory elements and two research steering groups have been established which include members from the two gatekeeper organisations as well as research participants and service user representatives.

Towards the end of the research project, focus groups will be organised to explore emergent findings, provide participants with the opportunity to see how their individual experiences fit into broader narratives and to discuss how best to disseminate the research in ways that have meaning to research participants themselves.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PRACTICE

Working with Gatekeepers

Exploring the lived experiences of welfare reform required the recruitment of relatively hard-to-reach individuals and the researcher chose to work with gatekeepers to facilitate access to a suitable sample. There are well-documented benefits to working with gatekeeper organisations (Emmel *et al.* 2007; Ritchie, Lewis and Elam 2003), with particular scope where there are existing relationships of trust and reciprocity between gatekeepers and participants. Emmel et al (2007) develop a useful typology of gatekeepers, arguing that comprehensive gatekeepers – those that provide a wide range of intervention and support – are most likely to have developed good relationships with their service users and are thus most likely to provide an effective route into the recruitment of hard-to-reach individuals. Comprehensive gatekeepers are contrasted with more formal gatekeepers who have a statutory and more supervisory role, are frequently treated with distrust and suspicion by hard-to-reach individuals, and are not therefore particularly effective in facilitating research relationships (2007).

By working with one comprehensive gatekeeper – a housing support charity – and one gatekeeper sitting midway between the comprehensive and formal gatekeeper continuum – a housing association - this research project managed to develop routes of access to hard-to-reach individuals. Critically, both gatekeepers had a material and substantive interest in the research project's focus and this was essential in ensuring their active engagement in efforts to recruit an appropriate sample. Indeed, just as it is necessary to consider how best to sustain engagement with research participants over time it is also important to explore ways in which to maintain the interest and involvement of key gatekeeper personnel throughout the research project.

There is a difficult balance to be struck between keeping the gatekeeper involved and informed and becoming a nuisance, and this research relationship has to be carefully managed and tailored to the individual research context. It is often important to also take time to support the gatekeeper organisation by attending key events, offering reciprocal help with their broader programme of work and being an active stakeholder over the longer term (Hemmerman, 2010).

When recruiting via gatekeepers, it is essential to reflexively consider how effectively the relationship between gatekeeper and researcher operated and how far the gatekeeper may have controlled access in ways which affected the eventual sample. By accessing participants via gatekeepers, one is inevitably excluding all potential participants who are not working with the organisation(s) and these sample effects should be analysed and documented. Nonetheless, working with gatekeeper

organisations is undoubtedly one valuable route to the recruitment of participants for QL research. There is also the advantage that many gatekeepers will be working with individuals over a period of time, providing sustained engagement that may well mimic and replicate the sustained engagement sought in researching through time.

Developing Trust, Reciprocity and Maintaining Engagement

Reflecting 30 years ago on QL research exploring the transition to motherhood, Ann Oakley (1981 p. 49) argued that the catchphrase 'no intimacy without reciprocity' can be readily applied to developing effective research relationships over time. With repeated research interactions, it is inevitable that the level of personal involvement between researcher and participant will increase and this must be carefully managed such that some professional boundaries are maintained while allowing opportunities for researcher disclosure and reciprocal offers of help and assistance to flow from researcher to participant (Hemmerman, 2010). Each individual QL researcher will manage these interactions differently, and there is no prescriptive approach that works for all researchers in all research contexts. Rather, it is a case of finding an approach which best fits the researcher's individual personality and moral reasoning, while always ensuring that good ethical practice is maintained.

In the research context under consideration, the researcher did disclose individual details about herself as and when asked and also offered participants benefits advice as she had practitioner experience as a welfare rights adviser. This benefits advice was seen as a central part of the reciprocal offer and it would have felt un-ethical to refrain from providing advice where it could have materially benefited the research participant. Undoubtedly, by giving welfare rights advice and following this through where necessary interviewees' lived experiences of welfare reform may have been different from that had they not been involved in the research. However, offering welfare rights advice helped develop the research relationship and perhaps contributed to the high level of sustained participant engagement (all 22 participants were keen to take part in a second interview).

After each interview, individual handwritten thank you cards were posted out to participants who also received a £10 gift voucher at every interview. These small gestures of thanks and appreciation did seem to help in developing a positive relationship between researcher and participant. It is common practice to sustain fairly regular contact with research participants between the waves of data generation (Henwood and Shirani, 2012, forthcoming), and this was done by occasional telephone calls to ask how things were going, as well as sending Christmas cards and occasional information about the research in the post. Arguably, there is a balance to be struck between maintaining fairly regular

contact with research participants while also remembering that this engagement is likely to come to an end when the research project finishes. Therefore, it is perhaps advantageous not to develop too regular forms of contact on which the participant might come to rely. Again, this is an issue for the individual researcher to reconcile and to determine where they feel the balance best lies.

Capitalising on new media, this research project also utilised Facebook as an additional mechanism for retaining contact with participants; a Facebook group was established where news and items related to the research were posted. This enabled dynamic group interaction between participants, and helped sustain the level of participant engagement. Evidently, there are additional ethical issues around using social networking sites and when invited to join the group participants were asked to sign up to ethical guidelines regarding confidentiality and respecting any within-group disclosure. On a very practical note, it is also useful to try to capture as much contact information as possible about each research participant given the reality that many may move house, change telephone number and so on between waves of data generation. Researchers should try to collect email addresses, where available, and to also ask for contact details for a 'link' person – an individual who the participant is happy for the researcher to contact upon failing to get hold of them.

Building in aspects of participatory research can also be effective in maintaining engagement and interest in the research amongst participants. By facilitating research steering groups and actively including participants in research dissemination plans, it is possible to increase the level of participant engagement in the overall research project. Individuals are often motivated to participate in research because they want to make their views known to the wider public, and many of the participants in the welfare reform project spoke of a desire to get the government to listen to their side of the story and to try to change some of the problems they identified with the current benefits system. While these motivating factors are valuable, the researcher has an ethical obligation to explain the likely impact of the research and the reality that it may not directly influence government policy in the relevant domain. Capturing and capitalising upon individuals' material interest in the research area is inevitable, but also brings with it a parallel obligation to develop effective national and local dissemination plans with particular efforts around developing chains of dissemination which are valued by and have meaning for the research participants themselves (Hemmerman, 2010).

The Ethical Dimension

There is a fundamental tension between efforts to maintain a sample over time and the importance of prioritising processes of informed consent by ensuring that participants have the opportunity to voluntarily withdraw from the research at any point. It is of course essential to make clear

to participants that they are free to choose not to participate in later interviews even if this does result in some attrition.

More broadly, there are ethical issues associated with the development of a more prolonged and intensive relationship between the researcher and the participant when contrasting QL research with cross-sectional studies. This again requires the negotiation of boundaries between personal involvement in participants' lives and the desire to maintain some professional distance. When working with hard-to-reach and vulnerable participants, it is particularly important that one gives careful consideration to how best to respond ethically to need while managing the responsibility and risk of over-involvement in individuals' lives (Hemmerman, 2010). In the research setting discussed here, participants were often signposted to other agencies for further support and advice but the researcher was careful to make clear the limitations of her own capacity to help them beyond providing some fairly rudimentary welfare rights advice. Developing a degree of personal involvement and trust while also making clear the boundaries of any additional help and support was felt to be important, particularly given the reality that the researcher's own engagement with the participants is likely to end almost completely when the doctoral research is completed. Undoubtedly, ethical dilemmas and tensions are magnified in QL research settings and it is thus essential to explore the ethical dimension at every stage of the research design and practice (Neale, *et al* 2012 and methods guide no.9 in this series).

CONCLUSION

This guide has explored particular possibilities and challenges connected with recruiting and sustaining a sample through time. By carefully considering how best to maintain a QL sample and reflexively contemplating the methods pursued and strategies adopted, it is possible to develop sound methodological practice and develop approaches best suited to individual research contexts. As with every aspect of the QL design, it is critical to combine planning with flexibility and to be prepared to tailor the particular approach to the research setting and the personality and preferences of the individual researcher / research team.

Arguably, it is better to think of issues around maintaining samples and minimising attrition as a 'challenge' rather than a 'problem', given that they are inter-woven with possibilities for developing deeper and more meaningful research relationships. Indeed, whilst cross-sectional studies do not face the same degree of 'challenge' in regard to sample maintenance they also do not have the same potential – that by walking alongside participants over time one builds relationships of trust and reciprocity that lead to the generation of incredibly rich data. Recruiting and sustaining samples over time may bring with it challenges, but it also brings great and exciting possibilities.

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