Getting the Numbers: The Unacknowledged Work in Recruiting for Survey Research

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This article reflects on the work of recruiting participants for survey research. Published accounts in this area frequently neglect complex and time-consuming elements of the recruiting process. These are negotiating access with gatekeepers, negotiating the cooperation of participants, and emotional engagement in the recruitment process. This article describes these processes through the example of recruiting nonprofessional young workers for a survey on sex, drugs, and drinking. The challenges of recruiting for a quantitative study where there is limited rather than prolonged engagement in the field are examined in detail, and strategies for overcoming recruitment barriers are offered.

Keywords: *survey research; youth; recruitment; research process; gatekeepers*

It is often complex and difficult to gain access and recruit a sample in survey research. The processes of presenting the research to different audiences, gaining the assistance of gatekeepers, and accessing participants are important parts of all survey research but are rarely discussed in the literature on survey implementation.

The challenge posed by entering the field varies between projects. Straightforward projects involve simply negotiating access to a mailing list. By contrast, more complex projects may involve seeking permission from different levels of government or management. Gatekeepers may also be asked to carry out key tasks such as mailing letters to potential participants, selecting participants from lists, or supervising the administration of surveys. The insights offered in this article are particularly relevant for projects using difficult-to-reach samples not easily drawn from discrete government agency lists.

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When survey researchers discuss recruitment, they focus on issues such as obtaining a sampling frame, publicity for the study, introductory letters, mailing protocols and reminder letters, or calls and response rates (e.g., Brown et al. 1998). There is a substantial literature on mail surveys where processes of survey implementation have been carefully described and researched. Dillman's (2000) influential work on mail surveys draws on this research and offers detailed advice on an implementation system that includes the wording of letters, types of postage and stationery used, the timing of reminders, and the use of incentives. Methods that draw on social exchange theory have been found to be useful in raising response rates. For example, multiple, respectful contacts with participants and a token financial incentive encourage people to reciprocate by returning mail surveys (Dillman 2000). Interest or relevance of the topic to participants and perception of the value of research to the community are also important for increasing participation (Pound et al. 2000; Senn and Desmaris 2001). Developing personal relationships with gatekeepers and participants is effective as well. In health research, recruiting clinicians through other clinicians and developing ongoing personal contacts have been helpful (Carey et al. 1996).

The extensive literature on surveys provides valuable advice on survey implementation but largely overlooks the processes of presenting the research project to gatekeepers and participants and negotiating face-to-face access. This could be termed the *emotion* work of doing research. For example, in an article on recruiting participants for a survey of careers of disabled adults, five recruitment strategies were compared in terms of project time and costs. These strategies included using agencies to contact participants, support groups, the snowball method, a media campaign, and mass mailings (Patrick et al. 1998). Useful comparative information is provided about staff time and the costs of each recruitment method. However, there is another layer of recruitment work that is not discussed at length. Patrick, Pruchno, and Rose (1998) state that the project staff initiated contact with forty-eight agencies and made presentations to twenty parent support groups but do not tell us how the project staff presented the project and themselves to these different audiences.

A possible reason for the neglect of these issues in the research literature is the dominant cultural model of what a journal article about survey results should contain—and what it should not contain. That model involves limiting the words devoted to methods, removing the self, writing in the third person, and detailing the steps of the research as if they were objective and not shaped through interactions with participants in the field.

Here, my aim is to critically engage the research process and discuss the processes involved in recruiting participants that are often glossed over in survey research. This involves being reflexive about the context of the research and the strategies used for getting the numbers. The example used to illustrate the substantial amount of background work involved in entering the field is a study of health risks in the social lives of nonprofessional young workers I carried out in Melbourne, Australia (Lindsay 1999).

The aim of this research project was to examine health risks in the social lives of young workers to feed into public health debate and policy. Young, employed, working-class people had been neglected by previous research in the area that focused on the needs of secondary school and university students—the so-called captive samples. The project involved a survey to examine the constellation of sexual, alcohol, and drug risk-taking practices by young workers. Confidential surveys were completed by 393 young people (ages fifteen to twenty-five) in the manufacturing, building, hairdressing, fast food, and retail industries in Melbourne. The sample used for this exploratory study was a nonrandom purposive sample (Lindsay 2001).

NEGOTIATING ACCESS WITH THE GATEKEEPERS

Negotiating access to a sample with a survey research project is an often unacknowledged process, but it is crucial to the success of a project. The presentation of both the research and the researcher to stakeholders, gatekeepers, and the participants themselves is the background work of research. It is part of what Morrow calls the "non-empirical" methods that accompany the empirical methods (Morrow 1994:230).

Presentation of Self and Research

Recruiting for the young workers project was not an easy task. I found, through first-hand experience, why most research on sexual health and alcohol and drug consumption had taken place with the captive samples of school and university students. The sample I wanted to recruit was at the bottom of the hierarchy in factories, shops, and other businesses. In each organization, there were a number of gatekeepers who could facilitate or prevent access to these young workers.

To gain access to young workers, I had to present the goals of the research to different audiences such as human resource managers, occupational health and safety managers, union officials, supervisors, heads of department, teachers, and the young workers themselves. Each of these audiences had to be convinced of the value of the research and the credibility of the researcher. In many cases, I had to second-guess how to present the research and myself in the best possible light to these audiences. When making initial contact, I started from the top or the middle of the management hierarchy or from outside the organization altogether. I was able to gain access to sixteen of the twenty-nine companies approached. As suggested by Patrick et al. (1998), using a number of different recruitment approaches increases diversity in the sample obtained.

Starting from the Top

One strategy was to approach general managers or human resources managers—the people who had the power to make the decision and allow me access to the young workers. Starting from the top has been successful when studying elite groups (Ostrander 1995), but it was unclear whether it would work with research on those toward the bottom of the pecking order.

With the young workers research, there were three apparent reasons for denying access. First, the research was not directly related to the work done by the young people or company profits. Second, sexual health and drug consumption are taboo topics. And third, managers feared the reputation of the company could be damaged by the research report. In sum, there were more compelling reasons for managers to reject rather than support the research.

So I was at a disadvantage right from the beginning. I needed to convince managers that the research was worthwhile, that it would not have a negative impact on the operations of the company, and that I could offer something to them.

First, I talked about the credibility of the research and myself as a researcher. I explained that this was government-funded, confidential research that had clearance from the university ethics committee.

Next, I said that the research would not have a negative impact on the company and would not take up work time. I argued that the report would provide them with useful general information about their workforce and the problems faced by their young workers. I made this pitch by phone and followed it up by fax. I developed an information sheet for managers in each industry. The disadvantage of this approach was that without insiders advocating for the research, it was easier for the managers to say no rather than yes. There was also the possibility that the young workers would feel this was a management initiative and distrust the research. I eventually gained access to seven of the fourteen companies using this strategy.

Starting from the Middle

Another approach was to begin from the middle and target occupational health and safety managers. The rationale for this approach was that it would be easier to gain the support of someone likely to be interested in young worker's health. These people could then act as advocates in getting approval for the research and facilitating workers' participation in it.

The disadvantages of this approach were that these people did not have the power to approve the survey and a pitch would also have to be made to senior management. As with the pitch to senior management, I emphasized the credibility and low impact of the research. However, I also stressed health issues and their possible impact on occupational health and safety. I was able to gain access to only four of the ten companies where the initial approach was to the occupational, health, and safety manager.

Starting from the Outside

This approach involved making contacts through trade unions or educational institutions outside the workplace. The pitch to trade union officials emphasized how useful this information would be for them in serving their members. The social welfare aspects of the research were emphasized. I explained that university students had been overresearched and that young workers had been entirely neglected. The advantage of this approach was that union backing would add to the credibility of the research in the eyes of the young workers. Moreover, union delegates could act as advocates for the research within workplaces, pointing me toward sympathetic managers and reassuring people that I had been screened. Again, the disadvantage was that these people did not have the power to approve the research and had less influence than those working on the inside. Moreover, in some workplaces, managers viewed union initiatives with suspicion. By contrast, one particularly helpful union delegate organized meetings with senior management in three large hotels for me to present the research. All of these managers granted access. I had positive meetings with people in four other unions but these did not lead to access with particular companies.

Another attempt to gain access from the outside was highly successful. I made contacts through educational institutions where apprentices study trades in the construction and hairdressing industries. I was able to make contact with people in student coordinating positions who were willing to organize for the survey to go ahead. The pitch again emphasized that the research process was worthwhile and would have a low impact. It would take up only thirty minutes of class time, and the institution would not be named in any publications from the research. The ease of access in these institutions was similar to recruiting captive samples within schools and universities. All of the four coordinators approached granted access. However, the young workers recruited in these institutions are located in particular industries, are younger, and are more highly skilled than other participants. So, in these cases, ease of access had an impact on the type of sample recruited.

Maintaining Flexibility

In my experience, the more flexibility the researcher can offer, the greater the chance that access will be granted. I attempted to recruit a subsample of young workers in the retail industry. But the organization of work and employees in this industry made it difficult to organize site visits to administer the survey.

Larger retail businesses commonly involve a large number of rotating shifts and meal breaks. Consequently, only small numbers of young workers would be available at any one time. After a number of failed attempts at access, I decided that the most effective method of recruitment would be for fliers advertising the survey to be placed in workplaces. The young workers could return the form at the bottom of the flier and a survey would be sent to them by mail. A participant payment of $10 was also offered. This recruitment method was successful in recruiting more than eighty participants from a range of retail outlets, supermarkets, and fast-food restaurants across Melbourne. The downside of this approach was that it favored highly motivated young people who would follow all of the steps in receiving and returning the postal survey and completing it in their own time. As a researcher, I had no opportunity to observe or control the setting in which the survey was undertaken.

NEGOTIATING ACCESS WITH THE PARTICIPANTS

The process of negotiating access with gatekeepers is only the first step in recruiting a sample. Researchers must also present themselves and the research project to those who will actually participate.

In the pitch I made to the young workers, I presented myself as their advocate. I told them that it was their right to have good health information and that I would give them a voice in the health issues affecting them. I emphasized the low impact of the research again. I talked about the limited time the survey would take and the confidentiality of the research. Where participant payments were going to be made, I also emphasized that. A payment of $10 to complete the survey made recruiting easier by encouraging "a sense of reciprocal obligation" (Dillman 2000:21).

I was extremely lucky with the pilot study for the young workers project. I made contact with an occupational health and safety manager at a manufacturing plant. She set up a meeting with management and union representatives for me to discuss the project, she ensured that the survey would take place on paid work time, and she sent out an information sheet and supporting covering letter to each worker younger than twenty-five. I was unable to negotiate this kind of support with any other business.

In most of the workplaces I visited, I could arrange for fliers about the project to be put on notice boards, but advertising was not a successful strategy in itself. The young workers were suspicious of the research and few appeared at the appointed time. It became clear that face-to-face contact and an opportunity for the workers to assess me were important. The most successful strategy involved gaining access to where the young workers were at lunchtime, displaying large signs about the project, and approaching the young workers directly. Taking a colleague, chatting with canteen staff, and "putting on a cheeky face" were also useful strategies.

The timing of the survey was also crucial—lunchtime was more convenient for the young workers than was time before or after shifts. I discovered this only after a few largely unsuccessful attempts at recruiting at factory gates or waiting in vain at the appointed place for the young workers to arrive.

RECRUITMENT, DIFFERENCE, AND EMOTION

As with prolonged qualitative fieldwork, recruiting for survey research is an emotional experience. There is an extensive literature on the emotional aspects of fieldwork in anthropology and qualitative methodology (Michrina and Richards 1996). As Shaffir and Stebbins argue (1991), fieldwork is a disagreeable activity, it is usually inconvenient, sometimes physically uncomfortable, frequently embarrassing, and often tense. Likewise, in survey research there are stresses involved in cold-calling gatekeepers and in assuming different modes of self-presentation. Time and resource pressures encourage researchers to organize recruitment opportunities where large numbers of people can be surveyed at once. Because engagement with participants will be limited, there is perhaps less room for error than with other research methods.

Since researchers usually study people outside their own social groups, differences between the researcher and the researched must be negotiated. With the young workers research, class differences stand out dramatically. This involves cultural differences, such as with speech and clothing, but also, more importantly, power differences. As Diane Reay (1996) has noted, class envy and its opposite, class contempt, rarely appear in research accounts (p.

449). The young workers participating in the project are younger, less educated, and poorer than I am.

Class differences between the researched and me had a definite impact on the recruitment strategies I pursued. I found going into workplaces and training institutions daunting experiences. Moreover, I feared and chose not to go to public bars or sports clubs in working-class suburbs to recruit young workers directly, which would have been entirely appropriate given the topics under investigation. However, as Lofland and Lofland argue, identity category barriers should be taken into account but not overemphasized when doing research (Lofland and Lofland 1984). Ultimately, my aim was to critically engage with difference rather than be incapacitated by it.

Case Study of Recruiting in a Factory

The example of recruiting in one particular factory illustrates how complex and difficult negotiating recruitment can be. It involves presenting the research and the researcher to different audiences, ongoing assessment of different strategies, and the researcher's emotional reaction to the recruitment process.

My first contact with the company was to call the human resources manager. I contacted her three times (during a two-week period) before I was able to talk to her in person. I described the project over the phone and offered to fax an information sheet and call in a few days to seek agreement. I called back and she granted access and delegated the organization to a junior officer in personnel. I was given this person's name and pager number. I left three messages for this personnel officer, again during a two-week period. She returned my call and informed me that she had passed the project on to a member of the health and well-being committee. I spoke to this contact on the phone and faxed information sheets to her about the projects. A month later, after a number of phone calls, a date and time for the survey to take place was arranged. The contact person put the fliers (which I sent to her) on notice boards around the plant. Two sessions were planned between shifts, workers on the late shift were asked to come half and hour early to do the survey, and workers on the early shift were asked to come after their shift. I drove a considerable distance from my workplace to the plant on the appointed day. I set up in the room and waited. Not one person came to do the survey. It was devastating. I was entirely demoralized.

This experience highlights the difficulties of recruiting for a quantitative study when there is limited rather than prolonged engagement in the field. I had never been to this factory and was unfamiliar with the culture of this particular workplace. From the outside, it was difficult to know why this recruitment attempt had failed so miserably. Had the survey been advertised? Were the workers suspicious? Or was the venue or timing the problem? I felt like a complete failure.

Going against my initial feelings, a mentor encouraged me to return to the factory and try different strategies. Given that I had already spent so much time and effort toward gaining access to this workplace, it was important to salvage something from the situation. Meeting the young workers in person would allow me to attempt recruitment again and, if this failed, to gain some insight into why the young workers did not want to participate. I rang the contact again and tried to engage her in my disappointment and negotiate access to the young workers in person. She spoke to senior management and another survey time was arranged, this time during a lunch break in the staff cafeteria. I took a colleague with me and we approached the young workers directly. We were successful, and eighteen young workers participated. One of the factory foremen saw us in the cafe and sent his staff over to participate. I was relieved that the recruiting had gone so well after such time-consuming negotiations to gain access and a failed first attempt.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, recruiting a sample for survey research requires a considerable amount of unacknowledged skill and behind-the-scenes work. In projects with difficult-to-reach samples, close attention needs to be paid to approaches for gaining access with both gatekeepers and participants. Researchers need to consider the experiential and emotional dimensions of recruiting, the stresses involved in negotiating access, and engaging and dealing with difference. Recruiting for the young workers survey involved careful thought about the context of the research and the sensitivities of different audiences and continuous assessment of strategies used. Recruiting also involved a combination of charm, flexibility, and persistence on the part of the researcher. Ultimately, engaging with these issues allows us to share strategies and helps us do more rigorous research.

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