Pearls, Pith, and Provocation

Planning and Recruiting the Sample for Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews

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In this article, the authors address the importance of sampling and recruiting for focus groups and in-depth interviews. They draw on a synthesis of the literature and their research experience and propose a three-stage checklist summarizing strategies that worked for them and addressed some of the problems described in the literature. The strategies proposed involve the three stages of prepare, contact, and follow-up. The prepare stage involves finding information sources and key contacts or champions, discovering related projects, and drafting alternative samples. The contact stage involves negotiation with key contacts and potential participants, confirmation, and plans for continued involvement. The follow-up stage involves feedback and continuing links in public events, action, and advocacy resulting from the research. The preparation and follow-up stages can require considerable time and resources, which, if not available within grants, can be provided through partnerships with community agencies or by seeking supplementary resources.

We agree with Baum (1998), who states that

> Most published research presents a sanitized view of the research process. A newcomer to research would gain the impression from published accounts that research was generally a smooth, logical process in which little goes wrong and which is immune from the vagaries and politics of everyday life. In practice, it is rare for such immunity to operate. (p. 112)

Baum goes on to suggest that social scientists have brought to the public health research endeavor a tradition of reflection in their research practice, opening up their processes to take an honest look at them. In this article, we start from our observation that textbooks and reports about qualitative research using focus groups and in-depth interviews frequently stress the importance of sampling and recruiting.

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Unfortunately, they rarely provide comprehensive descriptions of what can go wrong and detailed hints about how to avoid some common problems. We draw on a synthesis of the literature and some of our sampling efforts and propose a checklist summarizing what worked for us and what solved some of the problems we encountered.

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups have become a more commonly used method of data collection in health research in recent years. Texts on research and evaluation methods now routinely recommend their use (Crabtree & Miller, 1992; Hawe, Degeling, & Hall, 1990; Patton, 1990). Fontana and Frey (1994) have summed up their advantages as "being inexpensive, data rich, flexible, stimulating to respondents, recall aiding and cumulative and elaborative" (p. 365). Focus groups are very different from an aggregation of interviews or a group interview:

> A focus group is not a collection of individual interviews. It is a single entity in its own right. The structure and content of the discussion may vary considerably from one focus group to the next because of the unique dynamics of that specific group interaction. (Thomas et al., 1992, p. 11)

The group interaction can yield more and richer information than individual interviews with the same participants (Asbury, 1995; Murphy, Cockburn, & Murphy, 1992).

In this article, we draw on one of MacDougall's research studies that aimed to contribute to our understanding of how to increase the participation of the Australian population in regular, moderate physical activity, which, in turn, should lead to both individual and collective benefits. The study involved a complementary mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. A quantitative study by MacDougall, Cooke, Owen, Willson, and Bauman (1997) explored associations between physical activity, age, mobility, and social connections using data from 1,765 respondents to a community needs survey in Adelaide, South Australia, and found a number of associations. However, although epidemiological studies can demonstrate associations between factors, they cannot explore the causes or meanings of those associations. To explore some of these associations further, two related focus group studies were conducted (described in Wright, MacDougall, Atkinson, Mezzini, & Booth, 1996), and these focus groups were supplemented by case studies and document analysis.

The focus groups aimed to involve community members or groups with experience of the factors associated with low levels of physical activity in discussions about their experiences. We decided to recruit from existing groups or networks because,

- We were relatively clear about the desirable characteristics and experiences of participants and confident we could locate groups and networks accordingly;

- If we could select appropriate groups and networks, then we would have access to a pool of people who had selected themselves for membership and who would thus be likely to be suitable participants;
- It helped with the potential difficulty of appearing to seek people because of a perceived deficit. For example, we wanted to hear about experiences of social connectedness or isolation, but we did not want to enter the difficult territory of advertising for people who were labeled or identified as "lonely" or "isolated" or explore euphemisms or disguise the point of the research; and
- We considered that it would be easier to maintain continuing contact with organized groups and that the research method could be replicated and used as a means for taking action.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

In-depth interviews have been defined by Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, and Alexander (1990) as "repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words" (p. 19). People who already participate in a formal group or collective may be happy to speak within that collective in a focus group situation. People who do not join formal groups lead to special recruitment problems and may more appropriately be interviewed individually. Grbich (1999) discusses the complexities of gaining access to people in elite positions, such as judges and surgeons. Where the research participant criteria includes people who are not members of organizations or formal groups, more complexity is added to the search for and access to participants.

In areas such as community needs determination, it is often the people who do not have a formal lobbying voice that the researcher finds most difficult to reach, and yet their views are vital to the assessment. They do not readily approach the researcher in response to advertising, however well targeted that may be, and therefore the researcher must seek alternative pathways to them.

In this article, we draw on one of Fudge's research studies that aimed to gain a better understanding of the social health of nonprofessional men, postretirement, from the men's own perspective to give health workers involved in the promotion of healthy aging a greater insight into the issue (Fudge, 1997, 1998). The researcher did not wish to contact the men directly through clubs aimed at people older than 60, as this group had been involved in a previous statewide study, and it was perceived that their social relationship status would be influenced by their club membership. Community service announcements on local radio, radio interviews, poster displays in key local locations, and pamphlet distribution, occurring concomitantly over a 3-month period, attracted no one who was appropriate for the study. Two large advertisements and an article in the local press, spread over 3 different weeks, attracted only 3 men to the project.

However, there was more success when the researcher contacted local health service providers, who had worked with the researcher over a number of years, and asked them to consider promoting it to men who they felt met the research participant criteria. The researcher also contacted personnel in three large industries in the

local area to discuss ways in which recently retired nonprofessional men could be contacted and recruited for the study.

THE LITERATURE ON SAMPLING AND RECRUITING

A crucial issue is how to plan the sample and recruit participants for focus groups and in-depth interviews. The rationale for sampling using qualitative methods differs from that for quantitative methods. Samples are purposive rather than random and aim to select cases that will provide rich data. They are usually theory driven in that they either start from a theory that is being tested or that is growing progressively, as with grounded theory. The sample is flexible and evolves as the study develops, informed by analysis of data and guided by developing understandings. Sampling continues until little new information is being obtained (Baum, 1998).

When sampling, researchers are encouraged (Sarantakos, 1998) to consider the following:

- the kind of people to be included;
- the time at which to contact respondents, whether it be daytime, evening, weekends, or in particular seasons; and
- the kind of event to be studied, whether it be a special event or a routine event.

Reviews and reports of research using focus groups and in-depth interviews note that there can be difficulties in recruiting participants, for example,

- when the topic is sensitive (Baum, 1998);
- when deciding for ethical or analytical reasons whether to provide payment for participants (Baum, 1998);
- when focus groups are "disastrous because so few people showed up for the discussion" (Krueger, 1994, p. 89) because invitations were not personalized or followed up, the discussion seemed to be on an insignificant topic, the time was inappropriate, recruitment did not build on existing relationships, and incentives were not offered; and
- when "gatekeepers" withhold access (Minichiello et al., 1990).

To overcome these difficulties, a range of recruiting strategies have been recommended:

- Conduct the research in partnership with any consumer, community, or advocacy groups that are affiliated with the desired participants, especially if the topic is sensitive (Baum, 1998).
- Recruit through informal networks of colleagues, community organizations, community agencies, and the target group plus the use of advertising (Hawe et al., 1990).
- Recruit through existing organizations and networks, enlisting the assistance of a contact person to gain entree (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).
- Recruit from lists, for example, of medical practitioners (Murphy et al., 1992).
- Send individual letters followed by a telephone call to prompt and confirm participation (Murphy et al., 1992), ensuring they are personalized and stress that the potential participant has experiences and insights that would be of value to the study and that the study has benefits for the community (Krueger, 1994).

- Send follow-up invitations and arrange meeting times that do not conflict with existing community activities and functions, and then make contact by telephone 2 weeks then 1 day before the meeting (Krueger, 1994).
- Use trained staff to invite participants (Krueger, 1994).
- Give assurances to gatekeepers, and answer their questions before they are asked (Minichiello et al., 1990).

A SAMPLING AND RECRUITING STRATEGY

Table 1 summarizes the three stages of the strategy (prepare, contact, and follow-up) that we propose to sample and recruit for focus groups and interviews. Although general principles for each method are quite similar, in the discussion of the table we have highlighted instances in which we suggest a slightly different emphasis for one or another of the methods.

PREPARE

In the prepare stage, we recommend an iterative process of working from the research or evaluation goals while finding out about information sources and community networks. We have found it important in this stage to take great care in not only describing the sample precisely but also drafting a number of different ways to construct a sample. The reason for doing this is that it makes the second stage, contact, easier because it minimizes the complicating consequences of failing to gain access to or endorsement from groups, networks, or key people. We suggest that researchers acquaint themselves with other similar projects to avoid imposing an unnecessary burden on people's time or asking the same questions asked by other groups of researchers.

Our checklist for the prepare stage is the following:

1. Describing the sample: Have you used your research or evaluation goals to prepare a list of the desired geographical locations, characteristics, and experiences of participants?
2. Finding information sources: Have you obtained comprehensive lists or directories of groups, networks, and other sources of information in the communities in which you are interested?
3. Finding key contacts or champions: Have you made contact with people or organizations who know the communities (defined by geography or by common interest) to seek *key contacts* (who can make suggestions about possible groups, networks, or participants) or, even better, *champions* (who take an active interest and become involved in recruiting either directly or by allowing the researcher to use the champion's credibility or authority in the community)? A key contact or champion may also be recruited as a participant in the research.
4. Discovering recent or related projects: Have you contacted colleagues and community members to seek out recent or current related research projects and found out how they have involved or interviewed groups, organizations, or potential participants in the research? Have you ensured that your recruitment for your current research builds on previous research and on existing relationships?
5. Drafting alternative samples: Have you put together your description of the sample from 1 above and your community knowledge from 2 to 4 to form lists of groups, networks, key contacts, and champions to approach to fulfill the desired characteristics

TABLE 1: A Sampling and Recruiting Strategy

Prepare
Describing the sample
Finding information sources
Finding key contacts or champions
Discovering recent or related projects
Drafting alternative samples
Contact
Initial approach
Negotiation with key contacts
Direct negotiations
Confirmation
Involvement
Follow-up
Feedback to and from participants
Feedback to key contacts or champions
Continuing links
Public events
Action and advocacy

and experiences of your sample? Have you included alternative possibilities so that you can deal with access problems, especially for hard-to-reach groups, sensitive topics, or when potential participants will not be recruited on the basis of their membership in a group or network?

CONTACT

In the contact stage, we suggest that researchers seek endorsement from key contacts with communities, who may turn out to be champions for the research. In the initial approach, it helps to build a good relationship with key contacts, and producing tailor-made information about the research project helps to establish these relationships. Yet, we also caution against overreliance on the key contact, suggesting instead that researchers seek to gain speedy access to individuals, groups, or networks who may comprise the sample. Our experience is that the group or network can give more accurate information about the best time and place for interviews and the best method for staying in touch. We do not mean that researchers now ignore the key contact; indeed, we recommend that they stay with the process to provide their support and public endorsement.

If researchers do not gain endorsement from the key contact or the group, or if the contact is a gatekeeper who finds barriers to contacting the group, there are a few options. If the group is very important for the sample—for example, if it is a hard-to-reach sample or if the topic is sensitive—then researchers could reexamine the relevance and persuasiveness of information they have prepared, directly involve the gatekeeper in problem formulation, or seek a more appropriate person to negotiate with. Researchers may also attempt to bypass the key contact who is a gatekeeper and either find another contact or go directly to the group, for example, if the gatekeeper does not feel that they "own" the question or problem. Alternatively, if there are sufficient alternative possibilities in the draft-sampling plan, it may be more prudent to gracefully cease negotiations and try another option. We recommend

this option to respect the views of groups about participating in research, avoid unnecessary unpleasantness, and preserve the reputation of research and the researcher's institution as a citizen of that community, not a powerful force demanding compliance in research.

Some researchers may find it easier than others to explain their research. A researcher may be interested in, for example, the experiences of people with mobility problems when they use public transport. This is quite easy to explain to people. If formal approval from an ethics committee is necessary, this topic lends itself to clearly written information sheets, consent forms, and interview guides. For other researchers, there may well be difficulties in explaining in detail the aims of the research and in preparing thorough descriptions and interview guides for ethics committees. A researcher, for example, may be interested in listening to the experiences of a sample of people who have been described as marginalized from the mainstream and then using grounded theory to explore meanings. In this example, some sensitivity is required when describing the sample, and it is inappropriate to publish detailed aims, questions, and information. This presents difficulties when making contact with key contacts and ethics committees. In similar examples, we have striven to avoid jargon and euphemisms, clearly describing our methods and stating that we value the experience and knowledge of participants and will continue to involve them in our research.

Our checklist for the contact stage is the following:

1. Initial approach: Have you (or an appropriate colleague) approached personally or by telephone a key contact or champion for each group, network, or community? Have you immediately sent to the key contact or champion a brief pamphlet or information sheet that has been specifically written for that audience? Have you stressed that your research starts from the position that potential participants have valuable experience, knowledge, and insights that are important for the research and for the community in general?
2. Negotiation with key contacts: Have you sought explicit endorsement for your research and sampling methods from the key contact or champion? Have you discussed how you can quickly meet the potential participants at an appropriate time, for example, at a scheduled meeting, event, or a series of visits to group activities? Have you concluded that the key contact either does not endorse your research or sampling methods or is in other ways acting as a gatekeeper who makes it difficult to contact the group? If so, have you considered either critically examining the relevance and persuasiveness of the information you provide or directly involving the gatekeeper in problem formulation? Have you also considered bypassing the gatekeeper and finding another contact or making direct contact with the potential participants or respectfully moving on to another alternative without getting involved in difficult negotiations or wasting time?
3. Direct negotiations: Have you met the potential group or individual participants in the presence of, or with the clear and public endorsement of, the key contact or champion? Have you provided a description of the research, provided opportunities for questions, and prepared a brief pamphlet or information sheet that has been specifically written for that audience? Have you conformed to ethical standards in your approach to potential participants, including formal endorsement from ethics committees if appropriate? Have you negotiated a time and place for focus groups or interviews directly with potential participants? Have you determined an effective and ethical way of obtaining addresses of potential participants in order to maintain direct communication about the research?
4. Confirmation: For focus groups, have you written to potential participants in focus groups after the meeting time has been arranged and then about 2 weeks before the focus group and asked them to send a confirmation or apology on a form in the

prepaid and addressed envelope provided? For in-depth interviews, have you considered whether it is better to confirm by post or to make a personal visit or telephone call to confirm the time?

5. Involvement: Have you negotiated processes for continued involvement and feedback in the research and resulting action? Do you have a plan and resources for after the focus groups or interviews to maintain relationships with key contacts, champions, and participants who show continuing interest in the research or action resulting from the research?

FOLLOW-UP

In qualitative or action research, it is important to consider how best to maintain relationships and contact with participants. If there is an action component to research, there may well be advocacy or political action arising from the first two stages. We believe there should be a plan to maintain involvement, including dedicated resources. Involvement may be directly with the researchers or, by prior or subsequent arrangement, with an appropriate agency or person.

Our checklist for the follow-up stage is the following:

1. Feedback to and from participants: Have you provided participants quick feedback on the general themes from the focus group or interview and negotiated the process for involving them in developing a report? Have you provided opportunities for participants to give you feedback on their experience of the process of the research or action to be taken as a result of the research? Have you considered this feedback and discussed or negotiated resultant action with participants?
2. Feedback to key contacts or champions: Have you provided key informants or champions quick feedback on the general themes from the focus group or interview, taking care to maintain confidentiality and avoiding identifying either individuals or the statements from individuals? Where appropriate, have you sought opportunities to acknowledge the contributions of key contacts by way of publicity, testimonials, and so forth?
3. Continuing links: If the research is part of a continuing project, have you used newsletters, meetings, committees, or working parties to maintain involvement of participants, key contacts, or champions in the research process?
4. Public events: Have you ensured that participants, key contacts, champions, or their representatives are invited and welcomed to official launches, celebrations, or public events directly associated with the research?
5. Action and advocacy: Have you allocated time and responsibilities for you and other people to participate in or advise on action or advocacy arising from or associated with the research?

CONCLUSION

We have drawn on the literature and our experience to propose a three-stage process for sampling and recruiting participants in focus groups and in-depth interviews. Our three stages are designed to address some of the common recruiting problems, especially when the research deals with sensitive issues and is part of a research agenda that values action and advocacy as a result of, or in association with, research. The preparation and follow-up stages that we recommend require considerable time and resources. With respect to time, it may be that many hours need to be

spent searching for and negotiating with potential participants. In addition, there may be some weeks or months involved as researchers fit in with some groups' cycles of meetings, key events, or cultural practices. Researchers may also be asked to remain involved or become involved again for months or years after the formal research has been completed. We believe that although it has been said that the conduct of focus groups is inexpensive (Fontana & Frey, 1994), researchers should arrange the necessary resources not only to sample and recruit effectively but also to work in communities in a respectful way and to take part in subsequent action. This can make research quite expensive, and where research or evaluation grants may not always provide the necessary resources, researchers can develop partnerships with community agencies or seek supplementary resources.

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