Qualitative Research

The process of sample recruitment: an ethnostatistical perspective

Michelle Thomas, Michael Bloor and Jane Frankland

The online version of this article can be found at:

Published by:

$SAGE

Additional services and information for *Qualitative Research* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://qrj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://qrj.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://qrj.sagepub.com/content/7/4/429.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Oct 30, 2007

What is This?

Q

The process of sample recruitment: an ethnostatistical perspective

R

MICHELLE THOMAS
University of Sussex, UK
MICHAEL BLOOR
University of Glasgow, UK
JANE FRANKLAND
University of Southampton, UK

ABSTRACT This article draws on the authors' fieldwork experiences in four
different research studies to address the gap in the methodological
literature on the practical activities of sample recruitment. Boundaries
between ineligibility and refusal are considered along with the
'emotional labour' required during the recruitment process. In
particular, the article aims to draw attention to the necessary
indeterminacies in the recruitment process to show how the practical
reasoning and situated action of researchers in the field critically
determine the constitution of the study sample and the recruitment rate.
It is concluded that, while no rules can adequately specify the process of
recruitment, more resources, particularly to allow team recruitment,
would reduce researcher stress and allow greater quality control.

KEYWORDS: *emotional labour, ethnostatistics, recruitment, response rates, samples*

Introduction

The processes of sample recruitment are the unexamined foundations of
almost all sociological research, qualitative and quantitative alike: the claim
to have recruited a representative sample population is the basis of all argu-
ments about the generalizability of the research findings. Sociologists typi-
cally devote considerable research resources to sample recruitment: reported
response rates are a cause for professional congratulation or disapprobation;
and sociologists can be very sniffy indeed about the mere 'convenience
samples' of patients and students that form the staple fare of clinical and
psychological research. It is therefore surprising that sociologists have
devoted so little research attention to the *social processes* of sample recruit-
ment. The careful professional concern with specifying the *structures* of

sampling – size, eligibility, randomness, etc. – has been coupled with a relative disregard for the *concrete interactive processes* by which individual sample-members are recruited.

Gephart coined the term 'ethnostatistics' to signify the study of the everyday social processes involved in the generation of sociological data (Gephart, 1988), a field of study that embraces the informal practices of data-checkers and coders as well as the situated activities of fieldworkers and interviewers. In 1988, Gephart was able to draw on earlier writings from the 1960s by Cicourel (1964), Garfinkel (1967) and others, which pointed to the necessary indeterminacy of all formal rules, the demonstration that no formal rules on how to code data, or on which respondents to recruit, could ever fully specify all the occasions of their use. Coders and interviewers would always have to amplify those formal rules – informally elaborate their practical meanings – in order to be able to apply them without problem in everyday situations.

A parallel could be drawn between the activities of 'hired hand' research staff and the use of formal organizational rules by subordinates in those organizations (see Bittner, 1965; Bloor, 1980; Roth, 1966): subordinates demonstrate their organizational acumen by being able to account for their informal activities as being in harmony with the formal rules of the organization – a wide and heterogeneous collection of activities can be accounted for by experienced subordinates as similar manifestations of the same general rule. Relatedly, the mundane activities of coders and interviewers should be understood to be conducted in a taken-for-granted manner, part of the disregarded 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977) where there exists a moral order without a normative order, and quite widely different coding and interviewing practices can occur between different personnel without it ever becoming a focus of attention for either the subordinates themselves or the superordinates running the research programme. In an observational study, Peneff (1988) highlights how such instances occur among French survey interviewers, who adapt the interview process in response to the nature of the interaction with the respondent, and how those considered most conscientious and successful by their supervisors are the ones who deviate most from their instructions.

Gephart's designation of the research field of ethnostatistics has not been followed by a substantial body of research studies directly relevant to the social processes of sample recruitment. A small number of studies have been published on the practical activities of coders (e.g. Prior, 1989, on the coding of death registration data; Bloor et al., 1991, on the coding of HIV infection data). Those reports of recruitment that have appeared have problematized the issue, reporting on poor enrolment rates (e.g. Preloran et al., 2001), excessive recruitment costs (e.g. Kinard, 2001; Williams et al., 1988) and the need for careful recruitment planning (e.g. NSCAW Research Group, 2002). Relatedly, there have been discussions of particular recruitment strategies – the use of incentives (e.g. Dietze et al., 2002), snowball sampling (e.g. Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981), call centre screening to identify eligible persons

(e.g. Poscente et al., 2002) and the use of so-called 'indigenous interviewers' or 'privileged access interviewers – PAIs' (e.g. Kuebler and Hausser, 1997).

Of course, the topic of sample recruitment and the role of the interviewer within recruitment have been given much attention within the survey methodology literature, where the particular focus is on nonresponse as a source of bias. Studies, for instance, have assessed the impact of nonresponse on survey estimates (Goudy, 1976; Stinchcombe et al., 1981); have aimed to understand the characteristics of refusers and reasons for refusal (DeMaio, 1980; Goyder and Leiper, 1985; Schleifer, 1986; Sharp and Frankel, 1983); and have studied the survey introduction as a means of reducing nonresponse and thus of reducing bias (Dijkstra and Smit, 2002; Keeter et al, 2000). It is recognized in the literature that there is a gap between the rules of recruitment and interviewing and actual practice (Peneff, 1988), and that different inter-viewers have different skills and personalities (Hox and de Leeuw, 2002; Rogers, 1976) that impact on recruitment success.

A few studies have considered sampling and recruitment as part of the research process. Cornelius (1982), for instance, considers sampling as part of a discussion of data collection methods and research strategy in studies of unapprehended illegal immigrants in the USA. However, no reports have been centrally concerned with the necessary indeterminacy of the recruitment process in sociological studies, of particular everyday recruitment practices, and of the recruiter's habitus and practical reasoning. This omission is all the more surprising given recent sociological investigations of recruitment into *clinical* studies (e.g. Featherstone, 1999). This article aims to make an initial contribution to remedying this deficiency, drawing on the experience of the authors in recruiting samples for four different studies. The article looks at this mix of issues from a number of angles: at applying the abstract rules of recruitment procedure; at the hard emotional labour of recruitment practice; at the influence of gatekeepers on the recruitment process; and at dealing with refusals.

Outline of studies

The studies on which the authors draw all used non-probability sampling methods, methods which result in the probability of selection not being known, and which are commonly used where no suitable sampling frame is available or where probability sampling is not required. The studies employed a method of approaching all eligible respondents within the particular setting within each recruitment session. Three of the studies employed qualitative methods, while the fourth was a quantitative study.

The study exploring the sexual health of cruise ship crews (SHCC) was a quantitative study. Data were collected by researcher-administered question-naires. Recruitment took place in seafarers missions[1] in two major cruise ports: Southampton, UK, and Port Everglades, USA. Those eligible to take part

in the study were men and women working aboard cruise ships. In Port Everglades, seafarers using the mission were typically on brief periods of shore leave and were constrained by having to rejoin their vessels a few hours, or indeed sometimes less than an hour, after coming ashore. Crews in Southampton typically were staying overnight in the mission before joining their vessel to begin a tour of duty. Due to the short periods seafarers were at the mission, it was necessary to administer the questionnaire to those seafarers willing to take part in the study immediately after recruitment.

The study of the women's experiences of new sexual relationships abroad, or 'holiday romance', was a qualitative study (Thomas, 1999a, 1999b). Women were recruited at the baggage reclaim area and departure lounge of a regional airport to take part in a focus group and/or in-depth interview at a later date. The eligibility criterion to take part in the focus groups was simply to have travelled on holiday abroad without a partner. In-depth interviews were conducted only with women who reported having had a new romantic or sexual relationship during their trip. Eligibility was established via a brief screening questionnaire. Where women were recruited prior to their holiday (those recruited in the departure lounge), eligibility for in-depth interview was established over the telephone upon their return from their trip.

The study on male prostitution in Glasgow was conducted by Bloor more than 10 years ago (Bloor, 1995; Bloor et al., 1993). Male prostitution in British provincial cities is largely street prostitution and so the major part of the study was a street ethnography. Although many of the 28 street-working male prostitutes in the sample were recruited through snowballing, considerable efforts were made to minimize recruitment bias by the cold-contacting of prostitutes at recruitment sites. Working as a pair for security purposes, Bloor and one of three alternating co-fieldworkers investigated 23 different public places in the city (eight public toilets, six pubs, four parks, two discos/clubs, one amusement arcade, one sauna and one Turkish bath) as possible prostitution sites, before selecting six contrasting sites (two toilets, two pubs and two parks) for systematic study; these were then time-sampled over a period of 16 months, involving 240 hours of fieldwork in total. The recruitment strategy was successful in the sense that data were collected from a number of male prostitutes who were cold-contacted. However, the street sites where the cold-contacting occurred were ones with a large potential for misidentification: male prostitution is a covert activity and individuals targeted for recruitment by the fieldworkers might – embarrassingly – prove not to be prostitutes at all but 'punters' (clients), cruising gay men, or bewildered members of the public. Thus, recruitment was always a problematic activity and more likely to be an occasion for reflection and fieldnoting than in most ethnographic studies.

The study of the public's use of the community pharmacy (Frankland, 2002) used a diary and interview method with a sample of women over the age of 65 and of mothers of pre-school aged children who did not work full time. The majority of the sample was recruited to the study by cold-contacting in a

shopping street. Three recruitment sites, with contrasting socio-demographic characteristics (a city centre site, a rural town and a location in the South Wales valleys), were chosen, with a view to recruiting around 10 mothers and 10 older women from each site. When recruiting on the street, the researcher had only a very short time to assess whether a woman might be eligible and to make an approach. Once stopped, the woman's eligibility was quickly established and the study explained to them. Interviews took place at a later date. When it proved impossible to recruit older women by this cold-contacting method at the third site, these women were recruited from local social groups. When recruiting in social groups, the preferred method was to present the study to the whole group and then to talk to all the women individually or in small groups about their possible involvement. It was felt that they would be more likely to take part if they had spoken to the researcher personally.

Tales from the field

IDENTIFYING POSSIBLE RECRUITS

Scientific rules on sample recruitment do not provide a blueprint for recruitment practice. For instance, to require fieldworkers to 'approach every eligible respondent in the setting in a two-hour period' begs the questions of which persons in the setting are eligible and what are the boundaries of the setting. Moreover, fieldworkers will typically add their own practical caveats, 'etcetera clauses' (Garfinkel, 1967), to sample recruitment procedures, such as 'don't approach people who are already busy', or 'don't approach people who are drunk', or 'don't approach people you think you might have approached already'.

Fieldworkers must engage in practical reasoning in the situation of action in order to establish situated procedures that accomplish their fieldwork tasks in a sensible manner while appearing to be in accord with the formal rules of recruitment procedure. The competence of the recruiter is demonstrated by their ability to elaborate on the abstract rules of recruitment procedure in order to be able to apply them in everyday practice to get the job done – to avoid disruption in the recruitment setting, to avoid complaints from disgruntled members of the public, and so on (see, for example, Peneff, 1988).

In any study where the interviewer is responsible for identifying and approaching potential recruits within a research setting, the process of selecting whom to approach to recruit is far from a neutral scientific process but is imbued with subjective decisions. Decisions on whom to approach will be informed by assessments of the probability of the individual agreeing to participate in the study, by estimations of the respondent's likelihood of meeting eligibility criteria and by beliefs about potential interactive difficulties.

Subjective preferences regarding whom to approach can be based on nothing more scientific than an assessment of a potential respondent's facial expression or set. Put simply, there may be a tendency to approach people who look generally more 'open' and 'friendly' as opposed to 'closed' and 'hostile'.

Experienced researchers come to recognize cues in appearance, demeanour and social context that they feel will predict those most likely to agree to participate in the study. In the case of the SHCC study, Bloor and Thomas quickly realized that success was more likely when approaching people who were in the seafarers' missions alone, as opposed to in a couple or part of a group. Those people engaged in a game of pool or sitting on the veranda (at Port Everglades, where the mission bus arrived to pick them up to take them back to their ship) were generally more likely to refuse to take part. An expectation of rejection can make the approach more difficult for the researcher (Corbin, 1971). In her study of pharmacy use, Frankland was aware that she found it more difficult to approach women whom she perceived would be less likely to stop and listen to her, such as women with a number of children, or whose children were being difficult, or women who appeared to be in a hurry.

Where research takes place in a multi-cultural setting, as in the case of the SHCC study, researchers may also make assessments of potential respondents' ability to speak English (or the language of the study) prior to making their approach. In the SHCC study, this, in part, related to the desire for successful recruitment: respondents with little or no English were ineligible to take part in the study. However, upon reflection, we feel this was also driven by the fact that recruitment efforts and, if successful, subsequent questionnaire administration were considerably easier in situations where respondents had strong English language abilities.

Concern at causing offence can also inform decisions regarding whom to approach. This can be the case particularly when eligibility criteria may involve potentially sensitive issues such as age, income, education or sexual behaviour. In the male prostitution study, prostitutes would rarely have sex with clients in the cubicles of public lavatories; instead, they would attempt to establish discreet contact with potential clients and go off with the client for sex elsewhere. The recruitment of male prostitutes into the study therefore depended on correctly identifying young men who lingered in lavatories (or in the vicinity of the lavatories) for a long period, or repeatedly revisited the lavatories. Sometimes the wish to be sure of their identification led Bloor and his colleagues (1993) to delay their approach to the man in question, only to be frustrated when the suspected male prostitute disappeared:

> We watch two people we tentatively identified as rent boys. In one case I resolved to approach him as he left the lavatories for a third time. I followed him, rather than accost him, wanting to be sure that he didn't have a punter [client] in tow. To my surprise, he climbed straight onto a departing bus. (MB fieldnote)

Similarly, in Thomas's (1999a) study of holiday romance, she found her concerns about people taking offence at being asked about whether they had had a new sexual relationship on their trip also had an impact upon her decisions regarding whom to approach at the airport:

> I need to be less wary of approaching single women – groups [of women] are easy to locate, but there were some women who travelled entirely alone that I missed.

[Some days later]. Again [flight consisted of] predominantly older couples. Hard to locate lone female travellers, I am often deceived by women waiting with luggage trolley whilst husband retrieves luggage. I feel in a dilemma about whether to approach women with children, don't want to cause offence if they are travelling with partner, but these women may be single parents. [I am worried about] a probable bias in my sample as groups of young women [travelling without partners] are easy to spot but older women are less easy. (MT fieldnote)

Recruiting on often busy streets, Frankland usually had only a short time to assess whether the next woman might be eligible and to make an approach. Any hesitation about eligibility and the woman could be past and gone unasked. While assessment of eligibility was relatively straightforward with mothers, Frankland realized she was concerned about the possibility of approaching a woman for her sample of older women and subsequently offending someone who turned out to be much younger than her minimum age requirement.

Approaching the same person more than once is a possible occurrence in recruitment that is both potentially embarrassing and discrediting to the researcher. It is, however, a very real possibility, particularly in situations where respondents are in a physically bounded locale (such as a seafarers' mission or at a club for older people), and where there are people attendant in considerable numbers. Uncertainty regarding previous recruitment contact with an individual can be particularly likely where refusals occur very early on in an interaction and so researchers have spent only a very brief period with the individual. It was the case in the SHCC study, at times when seafarers were present in large numbers, that we were concerned about approaching the same individuals twice. Subsequently we found ourselves more inclined to approach people who had distinguishing physical characteristics or who were wearing striking outfits or items of clothing, because these were the people we felt most confident we would have remembered had we approached them earlier.

HUMAN RELATIONS

Relief, despair, embarrassment, amusement, hilarity and even hysteria have all been experienced as part of the process of recruiting subjects to take part in research. Any recruitment method that involves interaction between the interviewer and potential respondent (whether face-to-face or by telephone) can be understood as a process that involves some degree of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983), specifically labour which 'requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 1983: 7).

This emotional input can influence recruitment effort and is not more evident than in the impact of repeated refusals on the recruiting researcher. It is not uncommon when recruiting to encounter a whole series of refusals before receiving a positive response, as the following fieldnote illustrates:

My refusal sheet was in the room MT used for her interviews all morning and I lost count of the number of refusals that I had. It was approximately a dozen. A few

> just mutely shook their heads (3–4). A couple took the literature and read it and listened at length and declined. The rest said they had no time. (MB fieldnote)

In our studies, we all found that it was sometimes difficult to deal with such a repeated series of abrupt refusals and rebuffs, and to retain the energy and enthusiasm, confidence and positive attitude to approach the next person:

> I was finding it harder towards the end [of the recruitment session]. You find yourself expecting them to say no. Not sure if this affects my approach – makes me less assertive/positive. (JF fieldnote)

It is sometimes difficult not to experience a refusal as a personal rejection and also a personal failure (would a different, and *better,* researcher have been able to successfully recruit this person?). Refusal is interactionally difficult for both researcher and participant. This can be compounded in situations, such as that in the study of the sexual health of cruise ship crews, where exposure to the refuser does not end at the point where they decline to take part in the study. At the mission in Port Everglades, it was not unusual for seafarers to refuse to take part in the study, giving an accompanying explanation of 'I'm sorry I have no time' only then to sit and watch a game of pool or, on occasion, appear to 'take cover' in the mission shop, spending considerable periods of time apparently absorbed in the text on the back of packets of batteries and shampoo bottles. The following quote illustrates:

> He was on the internet for some time. I spoke to him while he was on the PC and asked if he would have some time for an interview when he finished. He took a leaflet and said he'd see. But he stayed on the net for another quarter of an hour and then left, avoiding eye contact. (MB fieldnote)

Similar situations can also occur in more open environments:

> I was most of the way through my explanation when a friend of the woman came past and interrupted us. The woman said that she hadn't really got time to talk to me, but then stood a few feet away from me and talked to her friend for at least 15 minutes. (JF recruitment note)

IMPACT OF GATEKEEPERS ON RECRUITMENT

Where access to recruitment sites is dependent on the maintenance of good relations with site 'gatekeepers', then additional emotional labour may be required on the part of the researcher. The role and use of gatekeepers have been the subject of much discussion within sociological methods. This section considers how this level of field interaction can influence recruitment in ways that are not commonly noted. In three of our studies (Frankland, 2002; Thomas, 1999a; and the SHCC study), continued interaction within the field between researcher and gatekeeper allowed this level of interaction to be studied.

In the course of the study of holiday romance, where recruitment took place at a regional airport, Thomas (1999a) sometimes experienced difficulties with airport staff, some of whom saw the sexual nature of the topic of research as

a licence to talk about sexual relationships in ways which both constituted sexual 'hustling' (Easterday et al., 1977) and/or (in the researcher's opinion) offensive sexism and misogyny. Encountering views in the course of fieldwork that one considers offensive is not an unusual occurrence and certainly not limited to those studies that focus on sexual behaviour (see, for example, Sampson and Thomas, 2003). However, the effort necessary to repress one's feelings towards such opinions and behaviours can nevertheless be at some personal cost to the researcher (Warren and Rasmussen, 1977).

Gatekeepers at recruitment sites may be very supportive of the study in question and very keen to assist the researcher, and it can be seen that this may affect recruitment. In the study of holiday romance, for example, many airport staff appeared to share Thomas's frustration when flights arrived full of couples and families (and no unaccompanied female travellers) and offered additional information that might help her recruitment efforts:

> 'I'll tell you the best ones [flights] for you. You should come for the ones from Palma on a Saturday night, you get quite a lot of young girls going out on that one and I bet they'd have a thing or two to tell you.' (Conversation with airport security staff, MT fieldnotes)

> 'How did you do then? Not many on there were there? Let's go and find one of the travel agents and see if they can tell us about the 18–30s ones, they'd be just right for you wouldn't they?' (Conversation with airport security staff, MT fieldnotes)

During the SHCC study, similar efforts were made by the Port Chaplain and a female cruise ship crewmember who was a regular visitor to the mission and well known to the researchers. The Port Chaplain and the crewmember were known to many crewmembers who visited the mission and both attempted to utilize these relationships in order to assist us in recruiting for the study. Their efforts often resulted in successfully completed interviews but, as both were fluent Spanish speakers, they sometimes recruited crew members using Spanish and it was only upon beginning the interview that we (non-Spanish speaking) researchers realized that the potential respondent did not have the necessary understanding of English to complete the questionnaire. These situations were uncomfortable and potentially embarrassing for both the researcher and the respondent: to terminate the interview early due to language difficulties may be embarrassing for the respondent and also for the person who had taken the effort to recruit them; to struggle on with the interview was, again, sometimes embarrassing, time-consuming for both parties and with an end result of a completed questionnaire that was of dubious reliability. There were also issues of ethics in terms of informed consent: where recruitment took place in Spanish, we had no idea about what was being said, and our subsequent efforts to provide information in English may not always have compensated for any discrepancies in information given:

> He was very shy. Semi-recruited by [mission staff member]. Said he wanted to change some money. I don't think he was clear about who we are or what the

study is about. He didn't make eye contact with me while I was talking to him. (MT fieldnote)

In the pharmacy study (Frankland, 2002), a number of older women were recruited from senior citizens' groups, because it had proved impossible to recruit these women on the street. In four of the eight groups visited, the group leaders exerted an amount of influence over the recruitment process, their interaction with potential recruits being viewed by the researcher at the meetings. The group leaders' influence varied from an eloquent introduction, which encouraged people to help, to more direct encouragement to particular individuals to participate. Group leaders both suggested group members whom they felt the researcher ought to talk to about participation, and tried themselves to encourage particular women to take part. The leaders of one group were obviously concerned with the low uptake from their group members:

> Toward the end of the session, the chairwoman and secretary asked me how many women had agreed to take part. When I said that one woman had so far agreed they were surprised and concerned and several times asked 'what about so-and-so?' While I talked to another woman, they identified a small group of women I had not yet talked to and went over themselves to talk to them, then indicated that I should come and talk to these women. The group was now due to finish. A woman they had pinpointed as likely to take part said that she had to leave as she had been offered a lift. Another lady gave me her phone number on a scrap of paper and said that I could contact her if I was desperate for people. The chair and secretary apologised to me, saying that they had been sure that more would co-operate (I now had three volunteers). I assured them that I was pleased with the outcome and said that obviously each person had to be happy to take part, and that people declined for a whole variety of reasons. (Frankland, 2002: 46)

At another group, the chairperson insisted that, once the researcher had talked to the whole group, she should move to a side room where anyone who wished to talk to her could. In this situation, it was not possible to witness the degree to which an individual had been encouraged to volunteer. The researcher was careful to ensure that the woman was herself committed to taking part, and was not doing so through some sense of obligation to the group leader.

REFUSALS

Refusal rates are important factors for quantitative studies, are regularly reported in research reports and papers, and are the subject of methodological study. There is a large survey methodology literature that aims to understand refusals in order to elucidate and eliminate bias. Within this literature, the role of the interviewer in nonresponse has been a topic of investigation (for example, Groves et al., 1992; Hox and de Leeuw, 2002). This literature has focused, among other aspects, on the introductory request in order to understand both its role in subsequent data quality (Couper, 1997) and how to adapt the introduction to enhance uptake (Dijkstra and Smit, 2002; Dillman et al., 1976).

Here we will illustrate from our studies that, like recruitment processes, refusal rates are influenced by and vulnerable to human decisions. When recruiting in the field, there may be, for example, a degree of ambiguity in decisions as to what constitutes a refusal as opposed to an 'ineligible'. In the SHCC study, when considering our refusal record sheets, it became clear that we had recorded as refusals a number of cases that in fact could have equally feasibly been recorded as ineligible because of language problems:

> Not sure whether or not this guy was eligible. I couldn't understand what he said to me, but he read the flier very thoroughly and then smiled and shook his head. (MB fieldnote)

Conversely, in the male prostitution study, some of the men approached disguised their refusal to participate by claiming they were ineligible – that is, were not working as prostitutes. In the following sequence of fieldnotes, we see two young men claim that they were ineligible when cold-contacted, only to be recruited later into the study by snowballing from another contact:

> At [a public lavatory] we spoke to two boys, scruffily dressed, who were sitting on the steps of the building on the other side of the street. When I mentioned a drop-in centre for rent boys [part of my cold-contacting routine] one of them let out a guffaw and smiled at the other one. They said they were waiting for their 'birds' (whom I assumed to be in the ladies lavatory). I apologised and we [co-fieldworker Neil and I] left. (MB fieldnote)

And the next day at a different fieldwork site:

> [X, a research contact] saw us coming, waved a greeting and immediately followed us into the concourse and 'summoned' a couple of rent boys to speak to us... One was (to my amazement) one of the scruffy lads who'd been sitting on the steps opposite...last night! Last night Neil and I had been completely taken in by his gormless guffaw and blithe assertion that he and his pal were waiting for their birds. Neil (I recall) had asked them if they knew that the area was a pick-up point and they mimed complete ignorance. Most convincing. Y confirmed that he and his pal were 'working' last night when we approached them. (MB fieldnote)

And a few days later at the second fieldwork site:

> Y was still hanging out with us when he was approached by ... the guy we'd seen him with hanging out on the steps opposite [the lavatories]. Y spoke a few words privately to him and then Neil and I approached. We had a laugh about how they'd thought we were CID [police] and how they'd completely convinced us of their innocence the other night. Y's pal agreed to come with us to the café for a cup of coffee... (MB fieldnote)

Researchers also vary in their skills in recruiting and beliefs about how far it is ethically appropriate to attempt to push for participation or convert a refusal.

Of relevance here, survey methodology literature has addressed the role of the interviewer within the survey introduction. The literature, for example, considers the effect of interviewer characteristics (Hox and de Leeuw, 2002; Singer et al., 1983), attitudes (Groves and Couper, 1998; Hox and de Leeuw,

2002) and expectations (Singer et al., 1983) on recruitment. Further studies have been made of the effect of different introduction and persuasion techniques (Dijkstra and Smit, 2002; Dillman et al., 1976) and the impact of extended interviewer efforts on nonresponse (Lynn et al., 2002).

However, research literature also notes that many individuals find it difficult to refuse to take part in a study in a clear and assertive way and, rather, attempt to make their disinclination apparent to the researcher in a less direct way; or, indeed, they may be genuinely undecided. For example, in their health research with Latino couples, Preloran et al., noted how potential respondents could refuse either actively, by declining to participate and openly stating that they were not interested, or passively, by avoiding telephone contact and cancelling numerous appointments (Preloran et al., 2001). It has been reported that some women find direct refusal problematic (Frankland, 2002), and that 'some women may take part in research as they do not know how to say "no" rather than actively saying "yes"' (Frankland, 2002: 55).

Attempts to recruit an individual who appears to engage in a 'passive refusal' can be very interactionally difficult for the researcher, and this can sometimes result in a decision on the part of the researcher to cut short their recruitment efforts:

> [I approached a] Filipino seafarer who seemed unwilling to say no but reluctant to agree. So I refused for him – 'I think perhaps you don't really want to do it'. (MB fieldnotes)

The interaction can be quite involved, with several attempts by the researcher to recruit the respondent before finally deciding to offer them a 'way out':

> She said that she was not from round here. I established that she, in fact, lived within 10 miles and said that I was prepared to travel that far. She said that she lived on her own, and I said that was okay, that I was talking both to women on their own and women living with other people. She said that she was away a lot and it was hard to say when she would be there. I said that I was happy to come and see her whenever was convenient for her, but that it was whether she was happy that was important. She said that she would rather not take part, and that she felt that others would be better than her. I thanked her for listening anyway, and she thanked me for talking to her. (Frankland, 2002: 54)

Our recruitment experience also shows how an individual who is actually attempting to make a 'passive refusal' can be successfully recruited:

> Said he didn't have much time and was waiting for the bus back to the ship. I suggested that we do the interview till the bus came and he agreed. In the event, he was sufficiently interested to continue when the bus came. (MB fieldnotes)

Discussion

This article has drawn on studies that have each employed non-random sampling methods. Different sampling methods allow varying degrees of 'freedom'

to the recruiter (Kish, 1965; Moser and Kalton, 1971); compare, for instance, quota sampling to the systematic sampling method of selecting persons at pre-set intervals. While these different methods have, by their nature, different tendencies to minimize the issues raised here, it is recognized that, whenever sampling and recruitment are performed in the field, there is room for interviewers to fail to follow instructions (Moser and Kalton, 1971; Peneff, 1988). The practical reasoning and situated action of the recruiter are perhaps most clearly viewed when employing non-probability sampling methods, but are relevant, albeit in varying degrees, to any recruitment that involves interaction between interviewer and respondent, where the interviewer needs to elaborate on the stipulated sampling instructions in order to get the job done.

Researchers inevitably have a considerable investment in the success of a study. If the research is funded by an external body, then it is likely that obtaining funding is the result of some considerable effort. With regard to personal career progress, the success of a study, particularly outcomes in terms of results and findings that are of intellectual, academic or policy relevance, can also be of considerable significance to the researcher. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that we have been involved in studies where we desire intellectually or politically significant findings. This desire can have an impact on the recruitment process (as it can on all other aspects of the research process), whereby one becomes predisposed to approach those people who appear to be most likely to generate interesting findings or findings that support the original research hypothesis. Relatedly, a high refusal rate may detract from the perceived validity of the findings; thus deliberately avoiding approaching someone whom the experienced researcher expects would refuse has the double virtue of avoiding feelings of personal inadequacy and maintaining a scientifically acceptable response rate.

Recruitment can be a time-consuming, frustrating and indeed thankless task that requires considerable effort and resilience on the part of the researcher. It has been acknowledged as the hardest part of the process for the interviewer (Peneff, 1988). In the face of a series of refusals and ineligible respondents, the researcher may experience negative feeling bordering on desperation. It has been argued that when using PAIs, where PAIs are paid on a pre-interview basis, there will be a temptation to falsify responses concerning eligibility criterion in order to increase the number of interviewees (Kuebler and Hausser, 1997). Such a concern can be extended to researchers in general. In difficult recruitment circumstances, there is, perhaps, an inevitable temptation to 'bend the rules' slightly, recruiting a willing 63-year-old when your eligibility criterion requires all participants to be over 65 years old, or a woman who had a sexual relationship when working abroad when your study is concerned with new relationships that occur when individuals are on holiday.

In our experience, recruiting in pairs or teams (common practice in market research) can do much towards reducing these biases in recruitment and can act as a form of 'quality control', because the presence of co-researchers

encourages individuals to approach *all* potential respondents and not simply those who appear to be most likely to result in a successful recruitment effort. In the male prostitution study, although the wording of the initial approach to a potential sample-member was designed to minimize the chances of the person approached taking offence, Bloor doubted whether he would have had the courage to approach many potential recruits without the nearby presence of his co-worker who provided not just encouragement, security and commiseration, but was also an alternative recruiter, someone who could confirm Bloor's assessment of eligibility, and someone in front of whom Bloor would not wish to be seen to fail due to pusillanimity.

Funding does not, however, always allow for the luxury of co-working. Both Thomas and Frankland were recruiting alone. In such a situation, it is important to be able to gain the necessary support outside the recruitment process, and to closely observe and address one's own assessment processes and preferences. It is also sometimes possible to find pragmatic ways to overcome one's preferences and feelings about recruitment, such as the use of a show card to establish eligibility such as age.

To really achieve adequate support, it is necessary to treat the researcher's 'intuitions, hunches, subjective responses' (Laslett and Rapoport, 1975: 972) as part of the research process. There is a need for recognition that these processes are not cheating, but are a necessary flexibility in order to get the job done (Peneff, 1988), and that they are not a slight on the honesty and integrity of the researcher. This would allow for the necessary support within the recruitment (and indeed the whole research process), where honest and open interchange and reflexivity about the process and ways of making it better/easier can take place.

Conclusion

This article has examined the practical activities of sample recruitment and the practical reasoning of the recruiter, in order to draw attention to the necessary indeterminacies in the recruitment process and to illustrate how these can have an impact on the constitution of the study sample and the recruitment rate.

These ethnostatistical activities of the fieldworkers can be compared to the activities of the bench scientists observed in studies of the sociology of scientific knowledge. The ethnographies of bench science conducted by Latour and Woolgar (1986), Knorr-Cetina (1981) and Wood (2002) emphasized how particular and selected 'inscriptions' (tables of data, graphs, papers) came to be reified into scientific 'facts' and how laboratory protocols may be differentially reinterpreted and enacted in order to produce publishable 'evidence'.

The recruitment activities reported here are pragmatic ad hoc procedures adopted by researchers in fieldwork settings in order to achieve practical solutions to everyday research problems. The nature of the procedures adopted shapes the constitution of the study sample and the recruitment rate, and

competent collectivity members can represent the procedures they adopt as operationalizations of the scientific rules of sample recruitment, hence reifying the sample as scientifically constituted and the findings as generalizable to wider populations.

We have shown how the recruitment process is one involving 'emotional labour' and, while team recruitment can mitigate the effects of emotional labour on researcher well-being and recruitment effort, hard emotional labour may have an impact on recruitment performance. We have shown how the boundary between ineligibility and refusal is always porous and defeasible – how ineligibles may be alternatively reconstituted as refusals and vice versa. We have shown how pragmatic decisions taken to 'get the job done' without causing offence and disruption may have the covert effects of boosting recruitment rates by avoiding potential refusals, and of under-recruitment of some sub-groups (such as those persons of an age just below the age eligibility 'cut-off'). We have shown how the same persons deemed ineligible by one recruitment route have turned out to have been eligible by another recruitment route, the earlier claims of ineligibility being simply disguised refusal. We have shown how gatekeepers, although often supportive and helpful, can influence the recruitment process in ways that are important but often difficult to document. And we have shown how the respondent's decision to refuse to participate may in practice be a joint decision, in which recruiters must assist respondents (particularly female respondents) in finding an interactionally graceful means of refusal.

There is a gap in the methodological literature in respect of descriptions of the practical activities of sample recruitment. This is against literature of survey methodology that addresses sample recruitment as a source of bias, whereas our purpose has been to illustrate the necessary indeterminacy of the recruitment process. Perhaps this gap is unsurprising. Garfinkel (1967) argued nearly 40 years ago that personnel within organizations establish ways of reporting activities that will protect their personal, organizational and professional interests. Similarly, the under-reporting of the recruitment process may be a means of protecting professional, personal and organizational interests, because researchers do not wish to render vulnerable the validity or reliability of their research.

While our objective here has been primarily to draw attention to the necessary residual indeterminacy of the recruitment process, it is also clear that greater attention to practical recruitment activities would be valuable, both in ensuring more uniformity of practice and in mitigating the hard emotional labour of the recruiter. We take a 'subtle realist' position (Hammersley, 1992) that recruitment is a neglected part of the research process, but that quality control could be improved with more time and resources. No rules can adequately specify the process of recruitment, but more resources (especially to allow team recruitment) would both allow greater quality control and make constituting the study sample a less stressful experience for the lonely researcher.

NOTES

1. Seafarers' missions provide recreation, communication and hotel facilities for sea-farers visiting ports; they are predominantly welfare organizations and attract sea-farers of all denominations and none.

REFERENCES

Biernacki, P. and Waldorf, D. (1981) 'Snowball Sampling. Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling', *Sociological Methods and Research* 10: 141–63.

Bittner, E. (1965) 'The Concept of Organisation', *Social Research* 32: 239–55.

Bloor, M. (1980) 'An Alternative to the Ethnomethodological Approach to Rule Use? A Comment on Zimmerman and Wieder's Comment on Denzin', *Scottish Journal of Sociology* 4: 249–63. Reprinted in M. Bloor (1997) *Selected Writings in Medical Sociological Research.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Bloor, M. (1995) *The Sociology of HIV Transmission.* London: Sage.

Bloor, M., Goldberg, D. and Emslie, J. (1991) 'Ethnostatistics and the AIDS Epidemic', *British Journal of Sociology* 42: 131–8.

Bloor, M., Barnard, M., Finlay, A. and McKeganey, N. (1993) 'HIV-Related Risk Practices among Glasgow Male Prostitutes: Reframing Concepts of Risk Behaviour', *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 7: 1–19.

Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cicourel, A. (1964) *Method and Measurement in Sociology.* New York: Free Press.

Corbin, M. (1971) 'Problems and Procedures of Interviewing', in R. Pahl and J.M. Pahl *Managers and their Wives.* London: Allen Lane.

Cornelius, W. (1982) 'Interviewing Undocumented Immigrants: Methodological Reflections Based on Fieldwork in Mexico and the U.S.', *International Migration Review* 16(2): 378–421.

Couper, M. (1997) 'Survey Introductions and Data Quality', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61: 317–38.

DeMaio, T. (1980) 'Refusals: Who, Where and Why', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 44(2): 223–33.

Dietze, P., Fry, C., Sunjic, S., Bammer, G., Zador, D., Jolley, D. and Rumbold, G. (2002) 'Using Ambulance Attendances to Recruit People who have Experienced Non-Fatal Heroin Overdose', *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 67(1): 99–103.

Dijkstra, W. and Smit, J. (2002) 'Persuading Reluctant Recipients in Telephone Surveys', in R. Groves, D. Dillman, J. Eltinge and R. Little (eds) *Survey Nonresponse.* New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Dillman, D.A., Gallegos, J.G. and Frey, J.H. (1976) 'Reducing Refusal Rates for Telephone Interviews', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1: 66–78.

Easterday, L., Papademas, D., Schorr, L. and Valentine, C. (1977) 'The Making of a Female Researcher: Role Problems in Fieldwork', *Urban Life* 6(3): 333–48.

Featherstone, K. (1999) 'Patients' Perspective of Participation in a Randomised Controlled Trial', PhD thesis, University of Bristol.

Frankland, J. (2002) 'Lay Knowledge, Self-Care and Use of the Community Pharmacy', PhD thesis, Cardiff University.

Garfinkel, H. (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Gephart, R.P., Jr. (1988) *Ethnostatistics: Qualitative Foundations for Quantitative Research.* London: Sage.

Goudy, W. (1976) 'Nonresponse Effects on the Relationship between Variables', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 40: 360–9.

Goyder, J. and Leiper, J. (1985) 'The Decline in Survey Response: A Social Values Interpretation', *Sociology* 19: 55–71.

Groves, R.M. and Couper, M.P. (1998) *Nonresponse in Household Interview Surveys*. New York: Wiley.

Groves, R.M., Cialdini, R.B. and Couper, M.P. (1992) 'Understanding the Decision to Participate in a Survey', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 56(4): 475–95.

Hammersley, M. (1992) *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* London: Routledge.

Hochschild, A.R. (1983) *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hox, J. and de Leeuw, E. (2002) 'The Influence of Interviewers' Attitude and Behavior on Household Survey Nonresponse: An International Comparison', in R. Groves, D. Dillman, J. Eltinge and R. Little (eds) *Survey Nonresponse*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Keeter, S., Miller, C., Kohut, A., Groves, R. and Presser, S. (2000) 'Consequences of Reducing Nonresponse in a National Telephone Survey', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64: 125–48.

Kinard, E.M. (2001) 'Recruiting Participants for Child Abuse Research: What Does it Take?', *Journal of Family Violence* 16(3): 219–37.

Kish, E. (1965) *Survey Sampling*. London: John Wiley and Sons.

Knorr-Cetina, K. (1981) *The Manufacture of Knowledge: An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Kuebler, D. and Hausser, D. (1997) 'The Swiss Hidden Population Study: Practical and Methodological Aspects of Data Collection by Privileged Access Interviewers', *Addiction* 92(3): 325–34.

Laslett, B. and Rapoport, R. (1975) 'Collaborative Interviewing and Interactive Research', *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 11: 968–77.

Latour, B. and Woolgar, S. (1986) *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*. London: Sage.

Lynn, P., Clarke, P., Martin, J. and Sturgis, P. (2002) 'The Effects of Extended Interviewer Efforts on Nonresponse Bias', in R. Groves, D. Dillman, J. Eltinge and R. Little (eds) *Survey Nonresponse*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Moser, C. and Kalton, G. (1971) *Survey Methods in Social Investigation*. Aldershot: Dartmouth.

NSCAW Research Group (2002) 'Methodological Lessons from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being: The First Three Years of the USA's First National Probability Study of Children and Families Investigated for Abuse and Neglect', *Children and Youth Services Review* 24(6/7): 513–41.

Peneff, J. (1988) 'The Observers Observed: French Survey Researchers at Work', *Social Problems* 35(5): 520–35.

Poscente, N., Rothstein, M. and Irvine, J. (2002) 'Using Market Research Methods to Evaluate a Stage-Specific Intervention', *American Journal of Health Behaviour* 26(4): 243–51.

Preloran, H.M., Browner, C.H. and Lieber, E. (2001) 'Strategies for Motivating Latino Couples' Participation in Qualitative Health Research and their Effects on Sample Construction', *American Journal of Public Health* 91(11): 1832–41.

Prior, L. (1989) *The Social Organisation of Death*. London: Macmillan.

Rogers, T. (1976) 'Interviews by Telephone and in Person: Quality of Responses and Field Performance', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 40(1): 51–65.

Roth, J.A. (1966) 'Hired-Hand Research', *American Sociologist* 1: 190–6.

Sampson, H. and Thomas, M. (2003) 'Lone Researchers at Sea: Gender, Risk and Responsibility', *Qualitative Research* 3(2): 165–89.

Schleifer, S. (1986) 'Trends in Attitudes Toward and Participation in Survey Research', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50: 17–26.

Sharp, L. and Frankel, J. (1983) 'Respondent Burden: A Test of Some Common Assumptions', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47: 36–53.

Singer, E., Frankel, M. and Glassman, M. (1983) 'Effect of Interviewers' Characteristics and Expectations on Response', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47: 68–83.

Stinchcombe, A., Jones, C. and Sheatsley, P. (1981) 'Nonresponse Bias for Attitude Questions', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45: 359–75.

Thomas, M. (1999a) 'Foreign Affaires: A Sociological Exploration of "Holiday Romance"', PhD Thesis, Cardiff University.

Thomas, M. (1999b) 'Exploring the Contexts and Meanings of Women's Experiences of Sexual Intercourse on Holiday', in S. Clift and S. Carter (eds) *Tourism, Travel and Sex* (The Cutting Edge of Tourism Series). London: Cassell.

Warren, C.A.B. and Rasmussen, P.K. (1977) 'Sex and Gender in Field Research', *Urban Life* 6(3): 349–69.

Williams, D.E., Vitiello, M.V., Ries, R.K., Bokan, J. and Prinz, P.N. (1988) 'Successful Recruitment of Elderly Community-Dwelling Subjects for Alzheimer's Disease Research', *Journal of Gerontology: Medical Sciences* 43(3): M69–74.

Wood, F. (2002) 'Controversy, Culture and Distributed Knowledge: The Accomplishment of Scientific Project', PhD thesis, Cardiff University.

MICHELLE THOMAS is a sociologist who is currently at the University of Sussex conducting research on rape attrition. Address: Department of Sociology, University of Sussex Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9SL, UK. [email: m.thomas@sussex.ac.uk]

MICHAEL BLOOR is a medical sociologist and currently a Professorial Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow. *Address*: Centre for Drugs Misuse Research, University of Glasgow, 89 Dumbarton Road, Glasgow G11 6PW, UK. [email: m.bloor@socsci.gla.ac.uk]

JANE FRANKLAND is a sociologist who has researched and published in the fields of health promotion, pharmacy practice and qualitative research. She completed her PhD at Cardiff University; this focused on lay knowledge in health care and in use of the community pharmacy. She is currently a Research Fellow at the School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Southampton. *Address*: School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK. [email: j.l.frankland@soton.ac.uk]