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REACHING 'HARD-TO-REACH' PARTICIPANTS

The recruitment of participants is an important step which contributes to the success of any study involving human participants, but accessing and recruiting prospective participants can be a challenging task. Drawing on direct experience, this article describes the challenges faced and the strategies adopted in order to gain access and recruit members of a gated religious community as research participants. In all, it suggests that transparency in reporting recruitment methods could benefit the research community.

One example of a hard-to-reach group is the gated religious community. These kind of communities are largely under-represented in academic literature. However, despite the difficulty in accessing participants from such 'hard-to-reach' groups, research related to these groups is important, as they are often able to offer direct first-person accounts of activities that can go unobserved by the wider gaze

A successful research and recruitment process

Research is fuelled by the human desire to acquire knowledge and it is the engine of progress for society. Hence, it is appropriate to say that the ultimate object of conducting research is the production of new knowledge. Research is successful when relevant insight is gained, and new knowledge is generated. Nonetheless, the identification of a topic to investigate and the planning of the project are not enough to guarantee the research success. In fact, the production of new knowledge is the result of data analysis, and this data is often gathered from human participants. Although the approach to research and the interaction with participants in the natural sciences and in the social sciences differ, accessing and recruiting participants can be one of the central tasks in the development of research in both fields. Accessing prospective participants, recruiting, and retaining them can determine whether research will achieve its purpose: knowledge-production (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015).

In qualitative research, researchers are interested in selecting individuals with unique characteristics, who are experts in or have experience of the phenomenon under examination. The recruitment process is the initial interchange between the researcher and prospective participants which takes place before participants give their informed consent to be enrolled (Patel, Doku & Tennakoon, 2003). The recruitment process involves different stages: from the identification of an appropriate target group to captivating the interest of potential participants and providing them the necessary information about the nature of the study and their participation (*ibid*). These stages can be challenging, frustrating and time-consuming. However, detailed information about methodological and practical aspects related to the recruitment of participants is often relegated to the backstage, barely addressed or even omitted in most research articles (Deane *et al.*, 2019; Kristensen & Ravn, 2015). In this way, important information is not always shared, encumbering the research ideal of transparency.

Recruiting hard-to-reach participants from gated religious communities

Chamberlain and Hodgetts (2018) defined 'hard-to-reach' groups as the portion of a population who, because of their personal circumstances, lifestyle, activities or because of their choice to live separately from the social mainstream are more difficult to access and engage in research. Accessing and recruiting a sample suitable to answer any research question presents some challenges and these challenges are exaggerated in accessing and recruiting people from 'hard-to-reach' groups. One example of a hard-to-reach group is the gated religious community.

These kind of communities are largely under-represented in academic literature. However, despite the difficulty in accessing participants from such 'hard-to-reach' groups, research related to these groups is important, as they are often able to offer direct first-person accounts of activities that can go unobserved by the wider gaze. Their members' direct knowledge and expertise of the subculture they belong to could shed light on practices and phenomenon specific to these communities, filling gaps in our field of understanding. Considering the scarce information in existence about the challenges in gaining access and recruiting participants from gated religious communities, this article aims to extend the academic literature which addresses this issue. This article is based upon my direct experience as a researcher conducting qualitative research on religious shunning in the Jehovah's Witness community.

The research context

Religious shunning remains in force today as an official practice adopted by different religious denominations, especially gated communities, authoritarian groups and cults. The Jehovah's Witness community is an example of a gated religious community which endorses religious shunning as a disciplinary measure, and this community was selected to understand this phenomenon. Religious shunning involves the complete cutting of the social, spiritual and economic ties between a former member and the community (Miller, 1988). The individual may have any contact with their spouse, children, parents, or the possibility of conducting business with members of the community terminated (Back, 2002). Furthermore, the individual may lose their social status and position within the community (Back, 2002; Miller, 1988). Therefore, the study in question was conceived as an exploratory project which sought to provide an understanding of religious shunning in terms of the meaning this has for the people experiencing it and for those who enact it.

Study participants included two groups: those shunned from the Jehovah's Witness community (Group A) as well as those with the authority to shun a member of the community, the Elders (Group B). Once the inclusion criteria had been identified and ethics clearance gained, the recruitment process started. Participants for Group A and Group B were recruited using two forms of purposive sampling: homogeneous and snowball sampling (Farrugia, 2019). Homogeneous sampling aims to select a group of participants

with a similar background or who experienced a similar event. Therefore, a homogenous sample is when the researcher has determined the population of interest very specifically (Dallos & Vetere, 2005). Once the topic of interest has been identified, and the research questions defined, the researcher needs to access the portion of the population which, because of its specific characteristics or traits, could provide a unique insight into the phenomenon explored to address the research questions. For example, homogeneous sampling could be adopted by researchers studying underrepresented sociodemographic groups, such as ethnic or sexual minorities. On the other hand, snowball sampling actively engages participants in the sampling process (Farrugia, 2019). The researcher initially identifies and contacts a few potential respondents who match the study inclusion criteria. They are then asked to recommend others they know who also meet the inclusion criteria. This sampling technique is especially useful when researchers are trying to recruit participants from an elite, a hard-to-reach or hard-to-find population, such as wealthy people, politicians or the homeless (Deane *et al.*, 2019; Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2018).

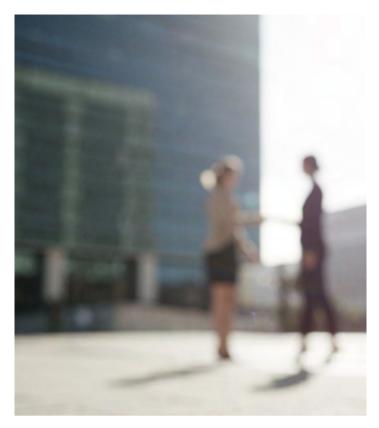### The recruitment process of participants for Group A

With prospective participants for Group A, the recruitment proceeded in the following way. After receiving permission from the administrators of several organisations and private peer support groups for former Jehovah's Witnesses on Facebook, an invitation to be involved in the research was posted. Additionally, the call for participants was advertised on Reddit which hosts a large community of former Jehovah's Witnesses. Some administrators

and therapists I contacted proactively advertised the invitation on their personal Facebook pages. The request to participate included a brief overview of the purpose of the study, the inclusion criteria, together with my contact details and those of my principal supervisor. Recruited participants were then asked to pass on details of the study to others who may have also wished to take part in.

Participants for Group B: challenges

Far from being an easy task, the recruitment process of participants for Group B, the Elders, required several planning iterations. Given that Jehovah's Witnesses are a gated community, all their efforts are channelled to guarantee a high degree of separateness from what they consider to be the outgroup. "Living in the world without being part of it" (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2012, p.5) is a principle which influences members' interactions with those they consider outsiders. Hence, any interaction with people outside the community is strongly discouraged unless it is related to proselytism (that is, spreading the teachings of their creed in order to make new disciples). Consequently, external invitations to engage in open discussions are seen with suspicion and are often avoided.

The initial recruitment plan for the Group B participants (Elders) was operationalised in the following way. In order to recruit the Elders, who are considered as the spiritual shepherds of the Jehovah's Witness community, a leaflet was produced. The leaflet provided information about myself, my affiliation, my contact details, as well as the reason why I was contacting them. The leaflets were placed in envelopes addressed to the bodies of Elders of the local Jehovah's Witnesses churches. The envelopes were addressed to the

generic 'body of Elders' of each church and not to a specific person because a list of appointed Elders of the Jehovah's Witness community is not publicly available. All the addresses of the Jehovah's Witness churches are listed on the Jehovah's Witnesses' official website (jw.org). After selecting the area of interest, the relevant addresses were identified and twenty envelopes were sent to the local churches.

The reply rate was disappointing. Four bodies of Elders out of twenty replied. Three of them sent an email, and one a text message. All four declined the invitation to be interviewed, suggesting visiting the Jehovah's Witness' website, where sufficient information would be found to answer my questions. At this point a response was prepared and sent. I explained that my main purpose of inviting them to take part was because I was interested in understanding the phenomenon of religious shunning from the perspective of their personal experience as Elders of the community. I pointed out that information on the practice of shunning is limited to the available sources online, much of which is in opinion-based articles. There is no previous research which gives voice to the Elders of the Jehovah's Witness community and sharing their experience would shed more light on this phenomenon.

In trying to build bridges, I explained the research process carefully and said that the questions to be asked would be shared beforehand and the transcript provided for their comments afterwards. I underlined that, as a researcher, I follow the British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines for research and I provided the BPS link. I reassured them about the protection of participants' anonymity. I underlined that the audio-recorded data, the transcription, and the related documents would be kept private and secure. The audio recording would

only be used for the purpose of transcribing and analysing the interview. If any academic publications originated from the research, then only anonymised quotes from the interview would be used. Lastly, I made clear that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions they might consider inappropriate and they had the right to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. This response was sent to them by email in three cases and by letter in one case.

Despite my best efforts to put them at ease, only one body of Elders replied. Part of their response was the following: "Our Elders have reviewed your request. We are not in a position to give a personal view on the subject but to endorse the references provided from our website".

The ideation and operationalisation of new strategies

The possibility of gaining an inside perspective was not looking promising. Nonetheless, I was aware that some members of the peer support groups for former Jehovah's Witnesses, were still part of the community. They define themselves as being PIMO which means being physically in but mentally out. This made me think about the possibility of finding Elders in the same position within the religious community who, because of this, would possibly feel less restrained about sharing their expertise and experience.

I then posted a message on Reddit addressed to the PIMO Elders. Also, I approached the administrator of a peer support group on Facebook and asked if they knew some PIMO Elders I could contact. They knew one. I prepared a letter explaining the purpose for contacting him, and the administrator forwarded my letter to the Elder. The strategy of contacting PIMO Elders on Reddit proved to be the

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most successful and a small group of PIMO Elders replied to my message in private. Despite their interest in the research, they were extremely cautious in interacting with me. In the Jehovah's Witness community, not only are interactions with the outside frowned upon but also it is a step which can have drastic consequences for the individual. Thus, researchers who decide to approach members of gated religious communities will have to deal with members' fear: fear of the consequences of being discovered and labelled as an 'apostate'. An apostate, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, is a member who defects from the Jehovah's Witnesses' creed. It is someone who speaks out against the Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings, organisation or directives. The fear-feeling is not based on mere threats but on the community's concrete provisions against the transgressor such as being formally shunned and losing everything.

Dealing with the complexities of gated religious communities

The fear of the PIMO Elders was something tangible during the email exchange we had. Reassuring them about their anonymity being protected at all time was the first step in gaining their trust. Providing my credentials was a second important step. I was transparent about the aim of my research – in order to disperse their doubts about a possible malicious intent from my side in contacting them. I provided them with my university contact details along with my principal supervisor's contact details if they wanted to verify my affiliation.

This stage of the recruitment process required a high degree of understanding, openness and negotiation but the results were worthwhile. Two PIMO Elders agreed to sharing their perspective on the topic. One Elder did not want to schedule a video or audio interview. Instead, he suggested providing written answers to my list of questions. A second Elder agreed to arrange an audio interview.

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Moreover, two former Elders who resigned from their position contacted me and offered their availability for interview. As with the recruitment of participants for Group A, the role of a gatekeeper was pivotal to the recruitment of participants for Group B. One of the two former Elders who first agreed to take part in the research, contacted other former Elders and eight more individuals agreed to be interviewed.

Four of the participants who agreed to be interviewed preferred to proceed with the camera off, possibly as a precaution to further protect their anonymity. They had stopped preaching and attending the community's meetings, but they had not officially left the Jehovah's Witness community. They had "faded away". Although the leaders of the community increasingly warn members to be careful about maintaining contact, there is no formal shunning for those who fade, and shunning an *inactive* is a matter of personal choice. Therefore, most *inactives* still have their family ties intact. For this reason, their position was as delicate as the position of the PIMO Elders, and their activism against the community is protected by anonymity.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the challenges I faced, and the strategies implemented in recruiting participants from a 'hard-to-reach' group such as the members of a gated religious community. The aim in doing so is to provide useful information about the recruitment process and to enhance methodological transparency. Transparency in research, whether qualitative or quantitative, is fundamental as it lays the foundation for a critical evaluation of the different stages of the inquiry process and findings (Given, 2008). However, sharing the stages of the recruitment process is not only about being methodologically transparent. It is also about strengthening the cooperation within the research community, providing other researchers with useful information and strategies to adopt in order to deal with the complexities of recruiting participants from 'hard-to-reach' groups, such as groups involved in illegal activities like drug dealing, or engaged in socially denigrated practices like sex trade (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2018; Benoit et al., 2005).

Deane et al. (2019) and Samašonok and Leškienė-Hussey (2015) argue that creativity and flexibility are necessary skills for successful professional activities. They allow the individual to solve unexpected problems and to adapt to new situations effectively. Creativity and flexibility proved to be essential in recruiting participants

from this gated religious community, and these skills were crucial to overcome the pitfalls of the initial recruitment plan. Creativity and flexibility helped me to focus more on the prospective participants' specific cultural context in order to identify better strategies to reach the target group.

Although this article focuses specifically on the recruitment of participants from a gated religious community, the same strategies can be implemented and adapted by researchers who wish to access and engage participants from other closed groups where an individual's fear of repercussions or stigmatisation could pose a challenge to the recruitment process. Sharing the stages of the recruitment process is about refining the approach to prospective participants, in order to increase the chance of recruiting an appropriate sample. Also, making the recruitment strategies employed more transparent, like this article hopes to do, serves important objectives such as replicability, accountability and effectiveness. It is not always easy to find willing research participants; therefore, it is important for researchers to reflect on the importance of identifying beforehand any possible drawbacks in the recruitment process and for researchers to consider the merits of transparency, creativity and flexibility.

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