Taking to the Streets:
The benefits of spontaneous methodological innovation in participant recruitment

In this article, we discuss the methodological implications of a qualitative research project that examined the experiences of bisexual men living in three metropolitan cities. A detailed research proposal was approved in advance by both the funder and our university ethics review board. Once in the field however, we found our methods inadequate for recruiting the sufficient number of participants. With only a week to collect data before leaving the city, it was necessary to substantially revise how we recruited participants. We took our research to the crowded streets, shouting for participants. In order to explore the benefits of changing methods *in situ*, we describe the genesis of the research project, its failings, and the development of a new data collection plan. The significance of this article is in the argument that it is important to maintain flexibility when conducting research: that rigidly sticking to a predetermined methodological procedure approved by funding bodies and ethical review panels can hinder the quality of data collected, and stultify the innovation of methods.

Keywords: participant recruitment, innovation, ethics, bisexuality

There exists a substantial body of methodological literature that is concerned with designing valid qualitative research (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Robson, 1993; Silverman, 1997). A central theme of this literature is that methods[1] need to be used in particular ways to ensure validity; or, in other words, given the critique of this very term (Altheide and Johnson, 1994), that a strong methodological framework is essential for the development of credible findings (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). There is also an underlying assumption that methods need to be planned in advance of their implementation (Yin, 2003). Accordingly, the methodological literature offers guidance on how to devise research projects, providing proscriptions against poor practice (see Delamont, 2002; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Wax, 1971). While much of this literature is aimed at the novice researcher, a substantial portion is designed to foster innovation or develop new understandings of traditional methods (Chang, 2005; Davies, 1999; Taylor and Coffey, 2008).

Funding bodies have also shown an interest in fostering innovations in qualitative research methods (Gwyther and Possamai-Inesedy, 2009; Wiles, Pain and Crow, 2010). This includes a focus on the use of visual and electronic media, as well as investigations into how to enhance user engagement and the transfer of knowledge to participants (see Koshy, 2009; Pink, 2006). Even though this shift has resulted in many positive developments, some scholars have argued that there is limited potential for methodological innovation from research funded specifically for this purpose (Taylor and Coffey, 2009). One reason for this is that the innovation occurs in the initial development stage with these projects, rather than emerging from experiential processes of data collection. Accordingly, methodological developments have been circumscribed by existing paradigms as well as by the small group of academics that constitute the panels for funding bodies.

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[1] We understand methods and methodology to be distinct things. Following Kaplan (1973), we view the methods as the techniques and/or procedures used in research while methodology refers to a more critical and comprehensive understanding of the research process (see also Cohen and Manion, 1994).

In addition to the methodological boundaries demarcated by this literature, there has been an expansion of ethics review panel power within universities. Primarily developed to protect the welfare of participants and defend universities from litigation, ethics review panels grant institutional approval of proposed research; including methods of recruitment. **And while these panels were necessary to guard against racist, exclusionary and damaging research projects of the past (Bosk and de Vries, 2004),** they have had the effect of restricting the autonomy of academics in designing research and its methods. This is because these boards structure control of methodological decisions away from academics with expertise in the specific research area under investigation, shifting it toward bureaucrats tasked with minimizing risk for the institution. Haggerty (2004:291) describes this as the 'creep' of institutional review processes, arguing that academics in the social sciences are 'currently witnessing the emergence of a host of new fetters on our knowledge production endeavors.' This is of particular concern for topics deemed 'sensitive,' including sexuality. Here, the conservatism of bureaucratic institutions can stifle research (Lee, 1993; Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005).

In addition to asserting the nature of acceptable research, ethics bodies restrict the possibility for methodological innovation outside of officially-sanctioned forums (Adler and Adler, 2002; Douglas, 1986). This is because academics must be able to demonstrate the efficacy of the proposed methods—something which may not be possible with less traditional or experimental methods. Furthermore, this approval also restricts the extent to which methods can be adapted in the field, as academics worry about deviating from those methods approved by the ethics review board. **And while scholars have made real advances in some of the genuine methodological issues raised by institutional review boards (Weis and Fine, 2000), academics maintain less autonomy than necessary to adapt their research**

design in the field and explore innovations in research methods (Tierney and Corwin, 2007).

In this article, we demonstrate the benefits of *in situ* innovation by critically reflecting on a research project that investigated the lived experience of bisexual men in three cities in the US and the UK. Having successfully applied for funding and completed an ethical review at our university, we entered the field confident of collecting the required data in the limited time available (one week per city). However, our plans to recruit participants failed and, despite modifications, half-way through the time allotted for data collection in Los Angeles, we had only managed to interview two men (out of a target of 30). In response to this, we radically changed our data collection techniques in order to attract the sufficient number of participants.

We argue that the new method of recruiting participants was not only necessary, but that it also enhanced the overall quality of the project—and we attribute this to the spontaneous innovation that occurred in the field; a form of innovation that was not subject to institutional ethics approval. Recognizing the gap in the literature regarding the logistical problems in participant recruitment (see Thomas, Bloor and Frankland, 2007), we also explore reasons why our participant recruitment methods are not readily utilized and argue that the inductive nature of qualitative research demands that academics have the freedom to adapt methods in the ways they think are most expedient.

The Original Project

Our research into men's bisexuality was inspired by the observation that gay dating and 'hook-up' sites (such as www.ladslads.com and www.gaydar.co.uk) had increasing numbers of profiles where men self-identified as bisexual. Traditionally marginalized in gay communities (Ochs, 1996), the seeming rise in profiles of young men who identified as bisexual begat questions concerning how bisexuality is viewed in the wider culture, as well as the extent to which openly bisexual men encounter discrimination from both LGBT and straight communities (see Klein, 1993). Given that our work has focused on the expansion of gendered behaviors for heterosexual men in cultures of decreased homophobia (Author citations), we designed a research project that would enable us to explore if and how decreasing homophobia influences the lives of bisexual men.

As qualitative sociologists, we decided to undertake in-depth interviews with bisexual men stratified across three different age categories (18-22, 28-32, 40-50). Our thesis was that given a recent decrease in cultural homophobia (Kozloski, 2010; Loftus, 2001; Weeks, 2007), it is likely that the younger age groups would have more positive experiences of coming out as bisexual compared to older men. Because we desired to examine the influence of geographic location, we planned to collect data in Los Angeles, New York and London.

A central component of our design was that we sought to improve the validity and reliability of our sample compared to that of other research on the experiences of LGBT people. A serious critique of research on sexual minorities is that participants come from a statistically biased sample of men and women who have had particularly troubled/troubling experiences (Hartman, 2011; Savin-Williams, 2001). That is, with researchers frequently using self-help groups and counseling services to locate LGBT individuals, there is selection bias to those who have experienced discrimination (thus requiring support). This can lead to the exaggeration of discrimination because it is over-generalized to all members of LGBT communities. In order to avoid this selection bias, we opted to locate informants through LGBT social networking and hook-up sites.

We viewed these Internet sites as a fertile space for the recruitment of participants because they are, in essence, a public database of men attracted to both men and women. Given the information provided on many profiles about one's sexual identity, it should have been easy to select men who fit our participant criteria. Given that the Internet has become the primary way of linking with other LGBT people (see Gray, 2009; Harper, Burce, Serrano and Jamil, 2009), we assumed that even if younger bisexual men may access these sites more frequently than older men, we would still be able to recruit the sufficient number of participants across the age ranges. Accordingly, a month before spending a week in each city, we created profiles on several gay websites and set about contacting bisexual men in the cities we planned to visit.

The plan was that having explained the project online, we would arrange to meet the participants in a cafe or bar. Complementing this approach, we asked the owners of these venues to post flyers, advertising our research dates and contact information. We had a laptop and cell phone to ensure that we could maintain contact with participants at any time. Each participant would be paid $40 for a forty minute interview. Collecting 30 interviews per city across three age groupings (N=90) would provide a rich and detailed understanding of a variety of bisexual men in major metropolitan cities.

All Good Plans…

Before leaving to collect data for a week in our first city (Los Angeles), we spent several hours on gay/bi (male) dating sites trying to locate bisexual men interested in participating in our study. In addition to being banned from one site (our research was deemed 'commercial'), we had only moderate success. While several men responded, saying that they were interested and requesting that we contact them nearer the time, few responded when we arrived in the city.

In an attempt to bolster our number of participants, on reaching Los Angeles, we positioned ourselves in a popular gay coffee shop, created profiles on websites (such as www.adam4adam.com) and attempted to recruit more bisexual men. We hoped that we would find men in the local area who would be able to visit the coffee shop that day. With three researchers in the field, we would have someone available to interview at any time. We also hoped that the two men we had pre-arranged to interview would have bisexual friends, so that we could take advantage of snowball sampling, recognizing its limitations. However, of the two pre-arranged interviews, only one showed up, and he had just one bisexual friend. Thus, despite spending 16 hours online over two consecutive days trying to arrange interviews with men to come to this specific coffee shop, we only interviewed two bisexual men. On the third day, we determined to drive to meet participants at a public location of their choice, but managed to conduct just one additional interview.

We identified four key problems that made this an ineffective method of recruiting participants (see also Hartman, 2011). The first was that many people who responded to our messages only wanted to have sex with us. A number of participants asked if the interview could happen at their house and many said they would provide us with the interview only after sex; others responded to our messages with questions of a sexual nature.

The second problem was that while many people found our research interesting, they were either too busy to meet in the timeframe or they were not willing to organize a specific time to meet. It seemed that for them, going online was part of relaxing after work, and they did not want to engage in our research during this time. A third problem was that several men declared their interest, arranged to meet and then did not show.

The final problem with this method was that it seemed to attract the ‘typical’ type of sexual minority research participant. As discussed earlier, research on sexual minorities has traditionally recruited participants from LGBT networks. While one interviewee had not been part of LGBT groups, the other participant was. Furthermore, while it is clear that a wide range of bisexual men were using the Internet, several of the men who organized a time to meet – regardless of whether they actually showed up – commented that they attended LGBT groups. Accordingly, this method did not appear to locate a different sample of bisexual men; rather, it served as a proxy for recruiting the same sample of bisexual men as previous research.

Taking it to the Streets

With our recruitment poster buried among 15 others in the coffee shop, and watching the time pass without prospects of interviews, we developed a new plan. We decided it was necessary to abandon the Internet as a source of potential participants because it was too time-consuming and ineffective. We decided against placing more posters, as this too failed to provide us with participants. Given that we had exchanged messages with dozens of bisexual men who expressed interest in the project, but did not want to organize a specific time to meet, we determined that we needed to advertise our research and interview participants simultaneously. We decided the best way to do this was to recruit participants in public spaces in person; by shouting to passers-by that we were looking for bisexual men to interview.

Knowing that bisexual men represent a small minority of the population, we determined that we needed to recruit them from places where thousands of people could be solicited. We decided the first location to do this should be Venice Beach—an ideal location because it is known as a bohemian area with offbeat activities, street performances, and thousands of passing pedestrians. We would evaluate how we were received in this location before trying other areas. Because of the success of this method as trialed in Venice (fourteen interviews in 5 hours), we decided to expand this approach to other public spaces with high numbers of pedestrians.

We strategically selected a variety of locations in each city. In Los Angeles, we also collected data on the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, as well as the Grove, on

Fairfax. In order to find younger bisexual men, we got permission to collect data at a gay youth dance club located in Downtown Disneyland. In New York, we conducted research on St Marks Street, near NYU campus, and outside *Bed, Bath and Beyond* uptown. In London, it included Old Compton Street, nearby a university campus, and in Leicester Square.

Once in these locations, we sought to maximize our visibility as a way of attracting potential participants. To enhance our visual impact, we wore cowboy hats and carried clipboards with brightly colored fliers. In each setting, we called out, 'Bisexual men, were paying forty dollars for academic research.' We repeated this at regular 20 second interviews, and ensured that we did so regardless of who was walking past. Two of the authors stood approximately 50 yards apart, facing opposite directions to maximize the area we covered. The third author sat on a nearby bench or in a cafe and waited to interview participants willing to be interviewed. In order to preserve our voices, and to allow for each author to become familiar with the data, we alternated who interviewed participants. If we collected three participants at once, we conducted three interviews simultaneously. **When a participant sat down to be interviewed, we discussed with them the aims of the project, asking them for written consent for interview in the same manner as the original proposal. In line with the original research proposal, confidentiality was guaranteed and anonymity assured.**

This proved to be a very successful way of recruiting participants, and we averaged approximately three interviews per hour. In order to improve the range of people interviewed, we repeated this procedure at different times of the day, including late at night, as well as at weekends. In order to maximize the variety of bisexual men we interviewed, we also attempted to recruit participants from LGBT spaces, walking into bars and clubs and canvassing the patrons individually and in groups. We targeted the gay scene in each of the three cities, visiting gay bars in Long Beach, West Hollywood (including The Abbey), the

Meat Packing District in New York and Soho in London. Here, we asked men in these establishments if they knew any bisexual men who might be able to participate in academic research. This served a dual purpose. First, it was a way to examine the attitudes of gay men toward bisexual men (the subject of another article under construction). Second, it enabled us to locate bisexual men who frequented the gay scene. Several men in each city were located through this process, and these strategies combined to enable us to complete semi-structured interviews with 90 bisexual men from our designated categories.

The Benefits of the Method

We believe our method of participant recruitment has many advantages, and consequently deserves academic dissemination. First, the recruitment method is that it made our research more visible to members of the public. While many looked amused, others were interested and dozens of heterosexuals stopped to speak to us about the research, too. Many took fliers to find out about our research, or to pass on to bisexual friends (we recruited 3 participants this way). Several wanted to talk to us about the causes of bisexuality, or what they thought about homophobia. Others (mostly gay men) wanted to talk about their coming out experience, and one kid wanted to know if we knew how he could start a gay straight alliance at his school (we referred him to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network). We took these conversations seriously, often writing down references, websites, or other information for them. We believe these conversations had positive social effects, and many people expressed their appreciation. It is our argument that in a time in which the social sciences are required to pay their way and demonstrate their worth, this form of public dissemination is a constructive and valuable endeavor (see Nussbaum, 2010).

This openness also had a positive effect on our sampling procedures (Thomas, Bloor and Frankland, 2007; Walby, 2010). The first way this occurred is through making the research more accessible to people who were not sure they fit the criteria. A large number of people inquired about participating in the study, for example by asking if they could be interviewed given that they did not identify as bisexual (preferring instead ‘queer’ or ‘pansexual’). There were several other questions about whether people were suitable to be participants, including if having sex with a woman once ‘counted’ as being bisexual. Importantly, many of the men we interviewed initially spoke to us with doubt that they would be eligible to participate or be able to organize a time for interview. The implication was that they would not have responded to an advert or travel for an interview, but they were happy to spend 40 minutes being interviewed immediately.

The most significant benefit of this recruitment method is that it succeeded in locating an incredible diversity of bisexual men. They ranged from bisexual men who had been out for over 30 years to an 18 year old who had just come out. We interviewed those who frequented the gay scene, and those who had never been; those in relationships with men and those in relationships with women, both monogamous and open. Two thirds of participants were Black, Latino, or Asian. We interviewed men who were poor, and two who refused to take the money, saying they did not need it. This diversity is particularly noteworthy given the reliance on LGBT groups and counseling services for recruiting participants in research on sexual minorities. Furthermore, the fact that we were not reliant on snowball sampling was an additional benefit, as this can have the effect of restricting participants to a small number of social networks (Pahl, 1995). Accordingly, we believe our new method enabled us to recruit a diverse section of society, and reach a number of bisexual men who would not normally respond to more traditional adverts about academic research.

We also think that collecting data in this manner strengthens the methodological logic of our research, establishing an alignment between our methods and the goals of the project. It can be argued that qualitative researchers have an obligation to ensure

that their methodology should in some manner reflect the social realities of their participants (Ramazanoglu 2002). This can be a challenge for researchers, who are part of a privileged group yet need to (in some way) 'represent' others, often from marginalized communities. In this regard, recruiting bisexual men from crowds recognizes the diversity of experiences of bisexual men and goes beyond the restricted sampling procedures of LGBT groups and counselors that have limited much of the research with LGBT populations (Savin-Williams, 2001). As our research has documented (Author citations), the experiences of bisexual men are diverse and more positive than previous research suggests.

Our research method also had one substantive empirical finding: Cultural homophobia has decreased to such an extent to have made this method possible. Of the thousands of people who heard our announcements, we encountered just one person who expressed bi/homophobic views. Conversely, we heard hundreds of responses from straight men who commented in one form other that they wished they were bisexual as they needed the money. When one mother's young son asked her, 'Mom, what's bisexual?' His mom replied, 'Well, we don't know what you are yet, but it's about who you love.' Given the wide range of locations in which we recruited participants, the time spent doing so, and the diversity of people to whom we announced our message, this is evidence that the expression of homophobia has become stigmatized in these cities.

This argument is also supported by the willingness of bisexual men to talk with us in public. It should be noted that in addition to the 90 men interviewed, dozens of others talked with us, saying that they desired to be interviewed but did not have the time. We also had to turn away dozens of bisexual men who did not fit our criteria, mostly because they were under 18, or because we had already recruited sufficient numbers of those in their particular age category. Accordingly, in this instance, this method of recruiting participants provided evidence for a social change in attitudes toward homosexuality.

We highlight that while this would not be sufficient evidence for decreased cultural homophobia in-and-of itself, it is a further piece of empirical evidence that shows a marked change in attitudes toward homosexuality over the past two decades (Kozloski, 2010; Savin-Williams 2005; Sherkat et al 2011; Weeks 2007). Our research has documented heterosexual male youth espousing pro-gay attitudes in a number of school, university, sport and fraternity settings (Author citations), while recent research has shown that despite elevated media interest in the past year, the suicide rates of LGBT youth are comparable to urban youth more generally (Mustanski, Garofalo and Emerson 2010). In addition to this, Weeks (2007) has documented the substantive positive changes that have occurred in the social, cultural and legal aspects of gay peoples' lives in the past decade. Accordingly, our project is further evidence of changing attitudes toward LGBT people more generally.

A Controversial Plan?

It is our opinion that some academics will view our methods as controversial. Indeed, several academics have questioned us about it, and we even had one academic approach us on the streets of New York to give his unfavorable opinion. Even if this is not the case, reflecting on the potential criticisms of our method is a useful and important exercise as part of evaluating the quality of this method.

The most common critique is that our method could result in fraudulent narratives—that passers-by would pretend to be bisexual for the payment of forty dollars. On the surface, this might seems a persuasive critique, but there is in fact no merit to it. The first reason for our dismissal of this claim is that it was surprisingly easy to distinguish 'genuine' bisexuals from those who were not. After someone would express interest, we would ask, ‘are you really bisexual?’ For those who were not bisexual, or were not used to being out, we found that they were unable to reply in the affirmative. We were also able to see some passers-by seemingly think about pretending to be bisexual but then decide against it. Our impression is that those who considered deceiving us decided it was not worth the potential embarrassment of being caught.

There was just one person who we identified as falsely stating that he was bisexual. However, the interviewer discerned that this man was not being honest within the first five minutes of the interview—something the interviewee admitted and apologized for. We are also extremely skeptical that a heterosexual or gay man would be able to improvise a life history over the duration of forty minutes that would convince the experienced interviewer that his story was genuine. And even if someone did manage to lie about being bisexual for the money, those who respond to traditional methods of recruitment (advertisements or other requests for research participation) have *more* time to fabricate a tale around their make-believe sexual orientation. Accordingly, we suggest that issues about the verisimilitude of this kind of data are germane to all interviews and not just those with participants recruited by our method (see Johnson, 2002).

The second criticism is that some bisexuals might be deterred from approaching us; that there would be certain types of people, including those we were specifically targeting, who would decide not to approach us in such public settings. However, given that our research aim was to see how openly bisexual men are treated by friends, family, colleagues and the general public, recruiting bisexual men in such a public manner helped select precisely the type of informant that was best suited to describe the experiences of being openly bisexual in urban settings today. Our method insured we interviewed the type of men who are not ashamed to be thought bisexual, and this reflects a certain degree of outness.

Finally, it seems to us that the contentiousness of our methods may not be based in academic reasoning; instead it is likely located in the dislike, not of what we were doing (essentially locating people by stopping them on the street), but *how* we were doing it. It is likely that some academics (including the NYU Professor who hassled us) will feel that our method was undignified. Calling out about academic research in the street can be seen to lack respectability. We readily acknowledge that taking our research to the streets *felt* undignified; stripped of the safety of our institutional affiliation, our nameplate on the door and degrees on display, it made us feel vulnerable, even somehow amateur. Yet after calling out a few times, we learned to stop censuring ourselves. We grew empowered in our calls for bisexual men and by the knowledge it was helping us collect meaningful research with a much more diverse group of people than we would have found using traditional methods of recruitment. In other words, it is our argument that a potential loss of respectability is not the same as a loss of validity[2], and we have little sympathy for the argument that respectability should matter.

Fostering Spontaneous Innovation

It is our belief that the method of data collection described in this article yielded rich and important new data on the lived experiences of bisexual men. Using an innovative way of recruiting participants that we developed in the field, we were successful in one of our project aims of interviewing a group of bisexual men traditionally erased in the research on sexual minorities. However, we are mindful of the fact that **time restraints meant that** our new methods underwent no form of ethical review, and this raises interesting questions with regard to the role of ethics review bodies once researchers are in the field.

[2] We recognize that validity is a contested term, and that rigour has also been used to describe the subjective nature of qualitative research. However, we use the term validity here for brevity, although we recognize that there are multiple truths and that qualitative research cannot attain objectivity.

In writing this article, and disseminating the process we underwent to develop these novel methods, it is our hope to promote spontaneous innovation as an element of the research process for others. While all academics are bound by ethical guidelines and the purview of institutional review boards, researchers should be open to changing their methods as their experience in the field dictates. We argue that this is the case even if it requires substantial revision of the original research design.

Given that research methods are tools that enable us to examine meaningful social phenomena, it is our argument that scholars must be sensitive to the social context that makes any setting in some way unique (Davies, 1999; author citation). This means that researchers must have the security – both intellectual and institutional – to adapt methods as they see fit. Being both receptive and reactive to these intricacies is vital if research is to understand a particular issue in depth; something that requires a certain distance from a didactic approach to research methods. By exploring the ways in which our project was improved by this flexible approach, we suggest spontaneous innovation can be cultivated to maximize data collection. In this case, we did so by taking our recruitment of participants to the streets.

We also highlight that the manner of spontaneous innovation will depend on the research setting and the broader social context of the group being researched. We recognize that our participants were able (legally and socially) to be public about their identities, yet there are people, communities and even researchers who are not afforded this right. This may included undocumented immigrants, people involved with sexual crimes and those suffering from institutional or domestic violence. We do not provide advice on how to foster innovation with these groups because it is our argument that this will need to come from those academics whose expertise is in this area and who best know the specific needs and dangers for the specific community.

Yet this spontaneous innovation is rare in qualitative research (**see LeCompte, Schensul and Schensul, 1999; Webb et al., 1999 for notable exceptions)**. In a detailed review of articles claiming innovation in their use of qualitative methods, Wiles, Pain and Crow (2010) discuss three forms of innovation: 'inception' (occurring at the planning stage), 'adaptation' (the development of traditional methods) and 'adoption' (the use of traditional methods in a new field). In their review, no article examined how researchers, attuned to their social environment and responsive to problems in their data collection, should adapt their methods *in situ*. This absence is not surprising given fears regarding the consequences of deviating from the methods approved during ethical review. It is our argument that to seek further ethical review is neither desirable nor practical, and statements of ethical review should grant academics autonomy in developing their methods once in the field.

It is important to stress that we are not advocating for a lack of engagement with respect to the literature on research methods, nor are we arguing for a haphazard approach to designing research. Rather we support an approach that is similar to the modified forms of grounded theory. That is, while Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that researchers should go into the field without a solidified theoretical framework beforehand, believing that this was the best way to understand the contextual specificities of a setting, they were criticized for also suggesting that researchers should not bias themselves by reading existing literature on the researched population. This was deemed problematic for obvious reasons (see Charmaz, 2006), and scholars using grounded theory today are expected to have a thorough knowledge of existing research in the area—particularly if they seek funding. It is through knowledge of this literature, combined with an open approach to the data that enables analytical and theoretical innovation. Likewise, we argue that it is only through having sophisticated understanding of research methods that this form of spontaneous innovation can produce beneficial methodological results.

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