Finding the Rainbow: Reflections upon Recruiting Openly Gay Men for Qualitative Research

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Abstract: It has been suggested that greater attention needs be paid to the methods used when engaging in research with gay men, including enhanced focus on methods of recruitment (Filiault & Drummond 2009). Pursuant to that argument, this manuscript reflects upon the methods of recruitment used in research about gay men, and the importance of recruitment with regards to research validity and reliability. It is argued that recruitment is best conceptualised as a dynamic process which influences the entire research program, rather than a static event, as recruitment is often characterised in the literature. The authors then engage in a critical self reflection regarding the recruitment methods used in their body of research about gay men. Issues related to cyber-recruitment, emic and etic, and inclusion criteria are discussed.

Keywords: Recruitment, Validity, Reliability, Gay Men, Qualitative Methods

In a recent critique of the literature regarding gay men’s body image, Filiault and Drummond (2009) suggest that little substantive debate has yet to occur regarding the methods used when exploring men’s body image. As part of this critique, the authors engaged in an investigation of the methods of recruitment used when investigating gay men’s body image. This examination lead to the conclusion that the recruitment methods used in this area of research may have an important influence on the quality of data yielded and, accordingly, may have unanticipated consequences for the conclusions drawn from that data.

It is the central contention of this article that the lack of attention paid to recruitment is emblematic of the relative paucity of discussion regarding methods when engaging in qualitative research with gay men. Accordingly, there is need for greater attention paid to these methods, so as to ensure the quality and reliability of research regarding gay men and their life experiences. In this manuscript, we will provide an overview of recruitment, and the challenges incumbent upon conducting recruitment for qualitative studies of men, particularly gay men. We will then engage in a reflective examination of our own research experiences with gay men so as to elucidate the relative strengths and weaknesses of various recruitment strategies with this population. Ultimately, we contend that while there no single, optimal strategy for recruitment, researchers must be aware of the various limitations of the strategies used in research, and the impact of these strategies upon research quality.
**Recruitment as Process: Validity and Reliability**

We define recruitment as a process by which potential participants for research are made aware of a project, are screened for relevance to a project, and are formally invited to participate in the project. This process-oriented view of recruitment moves away from a viewpoint that recruitment is a singular, static event within a research program, as is the vantage point given to recruitment in many popular research texts (e.g., Freebody 2003; Grbich 1998; Patton 2002). Instead, we contend that recruitment is better thought of as a dynamic and on-going practice that influences the entire research process. In moving away from recruitment as a discrete event, to thinking of recruitment as process, we contend that it is more possible to conceptualise recruitment as an activity that has important consequences through the entirety of a program, rather than an event that ends with the commencement of data collection. Recruitment is inextricably linked to the data, and therefore cannot be thought to “end” when the gathering of data begins.

Additionally, the above definition includes two other components. Namely, recruitment includes a marketing element and a screening element. By marketing, we refer to strategies used to actually find individuals willing to participate in research. Screening refers to the development of inclusion and exclusion criteria, by which volunteers can be deemed suitable or non-suitable for the particular research project at hand. Both of these characteristics of recruitment have implications for research validity and reliability, as explored below.

**Validity.** A process-oriented view of recruitment is important with regards to the two fundamental markers of quality research: validity and reliability. Validity can be thought of the degree to which a research design or method actually assesses what it has been designed to assess (Gomez 2009; Messick 1989; Winter 2000). With regard to recruitment, the fundamental issue of validity concerns whether the chosen recruitment methods, or the selection criteria, will actually yield participants who are bona fide members of the target population. With regards to research about gay men, the issue of validity concerns whether the selected recruitment methods actually recruit gay men, or if the recruitment strategies have yielded a similar, but distinctly different, set of individuals. This perspective stems from queer theory’s observation that not all men who have sex with men are gay. Gay is an identity, not a behaviour, and it is an identity that may have different meanings to different individuals (Filiault & Drummond 2009; Jagose 1996). Therefore, when crafting selection criteria for a study, it is important to explicitly state the definition of gay being used, and to ensure that all participants actually meet that definition.

Ultimately, validity asks the question: “Has this research study about gay men actually studied gay men, as we have defined ‘gay’ for this particular study?” The importance of this question should be plain, since if a study claims to have investigated gay men, but recruited a sample of men who are not all gay, then any conclusions this research makes about gay men are rendered irrelevant, since the conclusions were based on data yielded from a sample that was not composed entirely of the target population. Therefore, when engaging in recruitment, the screening criteria must be deliberately designed and adhered to with fidelity so as to ensure the validity of the research. This example demonstrates the process orientation of recruitment, since a failure to faithfully implement the selection criteria when recruiting will have dynamic consequences through the remainder of the research process, potentially invalidating the results of the research program.
**Reliability.** The second traditional marker of research quality is reliability. This component of research is typically described as the ability for similar research findings to be ascertained with multiple iterations of a research design (Winter 2000). With regards to recruitment, questions of reliability interrogate whether a similar participant pool – and thus similar data – would have been yielded if a different mode of recruitment was used. For example, issues of reliability encourage the researcher to consider if distributing fliers at an undergraduate cafeteria would yield a different sample than posting an advertisement on a popular Internet site. If research is reliable, then similar data should be yielded on successive investigations. If these different modes of recruitment yield markedly different samples, and generate notably different data, then it becomes questionable as to whether the data is truly reflective of the social group or phenomenon under investigation, or if that data may actually be an artifact of recruitment. The reliability of the research is thus uncertain. This discussion of reliability again demonstrates the on-going and dynamic nature of recruitment, since if the mode of recruitment affects the data, then it can be stated that the mode of recruitment is, itself, a source of data that must be discussed and analysed throughout the research process.

In presenting the above discussion of validity and reliability, we acknowledge the on-going debate regarding the applicability of those terms within qualitative research (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Gomez 2009; Winter 2000). However, that debate has largely centered on questions of the validity and reliability of the words of participants. That is, questions of validity have investigated whether participants’ words are trustworthy, and questions of reliability have centred around questions regarding research rigour. While we believe those are important debates, the questions of validity and reliability in recruitment actually precede the questions of validity and reliability in data collection and interpretation. Indeed, we suggest that questions regarding the trustworthiness of participants are rendered irrelevant if those participants are not actually members of the target population, or if the manner in which those participants were recruited will have an influence upon the worldview shared. We therefore assert that questions of recruitment are thus more fundamental to research quality than questions of data collection/interpretation, and continue to be relevant during the interpretation of data. It is therefore surprising that discussions of recruitment are rare in the literature.

**Recruiting Men and Gay Men**

Despite the overall paucity of literature regarding recruitment, some writing has been done regarding the recruitment of men. In particular, Oliffe and Mroz (2005) advise that “men don’t volunteer, they are recruited” (p. 257). This perspective reflects the reality that many men are reluctant to divulge information that may portray them as weak, concerned about themselves, or in any way un-masculine. This reluctance may be enhanced if the researchers are male, since men may be even more hesitant to discuss sensitive issues with other men. Therefore, few men actively volunteer for research studies – particularly qualitative health research – hence underpinning the need for innovative modes of recruitment that actively appeal to this population.

Oliffe and Mroz suggest researchers make use of existing social networks when recruiting men for research. In particular, making use of men’s social contacts – particularly families and romantic partners – may be effective methods of recruiting this population, since these individuals may be better positioned to persuade their partners to participate. It is also advised
that offering small remuneration may be an effective means of making a study of appeal to men, since remuneration can help men to feel as though they are sharing something of value that is worthy of compensation. This offering may also change some men’s opinion of the research process, shifting from a perception of the researcher as powerful, to being an equal partner with the research.

Beyond remuneration, other factors may also enhance men’s willingness to participate in research. One such factor may be interview venue. Herzog (2005) asserts that allowing the participant to choose the interview site can contribute to a greater sense of ease on the part of the participant, which can, in turn, yield richer data. Self-selection of interview venue not only allows participants comfort and familiarity, but a sense of power in the interview process, a facet that may be of particular importance to male participants (Schwalbe & Wolkomir 2001). Accordingly, if potential participants know they will be able to select the venue, they may be more likely to volunteer, hence enhancing recruitment. Finally, in his dissertation, Filiault (2009) notes that when interviewing, using an inconspicuous recording device, like an iPod, can put participants at ease, since such devices are “fairly inconspicuous, and helped to maintain not only a confidential feel of the interview[s], but often helped participants forget they were being recorded” (p. 97). Likewise, if participants believe that their participation – if conducted in a public venue like a café – will be inconspicuous, then they may be more likely to want to participate.

Recruiting Gay Men

While, in general, men are difficult to recruit for research studies, gay men may pose a special challenge for the recruitment process. This difficulty may reflect the stigmatised and largely hidden status of gay men in Westernised cultures. In their review of the literature on gay men’s body image, Filiault and Drummond (2009) noted that that many of the recruitment methods used biased toward recruiting undergraduates. While this use of undergraduates likely reflects the ease of targeting this population for many university-based academics, this mode of recruitment has had the result of skewing the literature toward being a youth-based one that fails to consider the experiences of older gay men (Blando 2001; Harrison 2006). It also biases the data attained from a somewhat privileged cohort. That is, the experiences, and backgrounds, of young gay men who enter the university system are likely to be somewhat different from many of those young gay men who have not. Individuals who enter the university system often are more privileged in terms of their familial socioeconomic status. With that familial privilege may come a more educated and liberal stance towards social and cultural issues, particularly those of their parents. If that is the situation, the experiences of such individuals of being gay and coming out, for example, may be very different from other gay males that do not attend university and have less privileged backgrounds. While this is important in researching issues on coming out and the lives of gay men, they may in fact impact the data on issues that do not require socio-cultural comparisons among the gay male cohort being researched, such as body image.

Given the youth-orientation of gay culture, the stigmatization of gay men in the mainstream culture, and the general trend for older gay men to live in suburban or rural areas, it is therefore not surprising that older gay men are difficult to recruit. Morris refers to older gay men as “hidden treasures” and notes that “the invisibility of older gay men from any readily identifiable sampling frame had contributed to a paucity of research about this population” (p. 143). To address this oversight, Morris recommends the use of recruitment paradigms that are Internet-based, and take advantage of snowball sampling. However, as explored below, both of those modes of recruitment entail certain limitations and liabilities.
The advice provided above is useful in finding (gay) male participants and making the research process of the greatest appeal possible to potential participants. However, we also assert that this literature regarding male recruitment has also taken a static viewpoint toward recruitment. That is, although useful strategies for male recruitment are described, the literature fails to consider how the use of these modes of recruitment may influence the validity and reliability of the research. A process-orientation toward recruitment is necessary when evaluating the potential utility of the recommendations listed above, so as to be cognisant of the impact these recommendations may have upon research outcomes.

**Our Confessionals: Reflections upon Recruiting Gay Men**

One manner of elucidating the process-outcomes of these recruitment strategies is through a researcher confessional (Sparkes 2000). Confessionals provide investigators the opportunity to reflect upon their research experiences, and describe the reality of the research process, and those details that are often excluded from published research reports. In confessing our experiences as researchers, we are able to reflect on the experiences we have had in recruitment, and the ways in which these experiences may have influenced the resulting research outcomes. Truly, then, the confessional provides the opportunity to consider the process of recruitment from the vantage point of the researcher-in-action.

**Internet Recruitment**. The Internet has been recognised as a promising venue for recruitment (Hamilton & Bowers 2006). Such recruitment provides the opportunity to reach a wider range of participants, including those that may not be accessed by more traditional modes of recruitment. Indeed, the Internet is ideal for recruiting gay men, since this cohort tends to be Web-literate, often moreso than their straight counterparts (Brown, et al 2005). Given these trends, Morris (2006) recommends using the Internet when recruiting older gay men.

However, populations accessed through the Internet may be qualitatively different than those recruited through traditional means. As reviewed by Filiault and Drummond (2009), gay men accessed through the Internet tend to be younger, less well educated, and more sexually promiscuous. Each of these characteristics may influence the perspectives shared by participants in qualitative research.

Our experiences in research, demonstrate that participants recruited through the Web may be different than those recruited via non-Internet-based means. For example, in Murray Drummond’s (2005a,b) research on young gay men’s body image, a local Internet-based bulletin board system was used to recruit participants. The bulletin board was specifically targeted to young gay men in South Australia, and was established by a gay men’s counseling group. In addition, some participants were recruited directly from a local centre for gay men. In reflecting upon these participants, it is noted that more of the men recruited from the gay men’s centre were engaged in higher education, as compared to the Internet participants, few of whom pursued post-secondary credentials. The men with higher levels of education were often more articulate, and were better able to express their viewpoints regarding such complex matters as masculinities, sexuality, and identity. It was often these men’s words that were used in the final written report of this research because they were more able to concisely reflect the overall themes in a more coherent manner. While this reality does not

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1 All research described in this article was approved by the relevant Human Research Ethics Committees.
make redundant the data from the Internet participants, it does render those participants more passive in the final report.

Shaun Filiault’s research also reflects those trends. In his research about gay athletes (in press A,B; in review), several Web-based recruitment strategies were used. One such strategy was an article posted on an Internet site specifically targeted to gay athletes. In addition, an advertisement was placed on an Internet chat site commonly used to procure one-time sexual partners. A total of three participants from the sports-oriented site were recruited, and all three participants actually arrived for their interviews. These men provided rich phenomenological data, much of which was used in the published articles about this study. By contrast, seven interviews were scheduled with men from the sexualised Web site; however, only two of these men presented for their interviews. Even amongst the two men interviewed, the relative quality of the data was poor, as the men were somewhat un-articulate. It is also noted that these two men expressed a more negative sense of their bodies than the other participants, with one participant worried about his level of body fat, and the other concerned about his penis length. Thus, the men from the sexualised Web site were qualitatively different than those from the sporting site, and in a manner of particular importance to a study about body image.

The above discussion does not discredit the thematic analyses conducted in the published research reports. Indeed, thematic analysis reports on areas of consensus across the participants, as is captured in the notion of the “thematic” (Braun & Clarke 2006). However, these observations do draw attention to the tendency of researchers to utilise comments from participants that are more articulate in terms of conveying the essence of the message of the majority. That these men tend to come from a particular mode of recruitment is the specific point of interest. Within the context of validity and reliability, these issues do not pose questions for research validity – all of the men identified met stringent inclusion criteria, and we are certain that the participants are actually members of the target population. However, this discussion draws into question issues of replicability, since varying modes of recruitment has yielded disparate data, at least with regards to the quality of the conveyable data in written reports.

**Emic and Etic.** It has been argued that qualitative data reflects an interactional relationship between the researcher and the subject of research (Fontana 2000; Sparkes 2000). Indeed, while the interviewer must act as the moderator for the discussion, and later as the interpretive mechanism of data (Denzin & Lincoln 2000; Patton 2002; Seidman 1998), it cannot be ignored that the interviewer is also present as a participant during the interview process, making interviews inherently interactional in nature (Drummond 2006; Fontana 2001; Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer 2000; Sparkes 2002). Because of the central role of the researcher to the research program, the social positioning and identity of the researcher can be of importance in how the research is conducted and later data analyzed (Sparkes, 2002; Fontana 2001; Young 2005; Young, Filiault & Drummond 2007). This is not to say any social identity excludes a particular researcher from studying any given topic. Quite the contrary – the interview process and subsequent data analysis gain meaning and context from the relative social positions of interviewer and participants.

Emic and etic are two commonly used concepts used to describe an individual’s relative social positioning (Young 2005; Young, et al 2007). Emic refers to one’s insider statuses – a social positioning within a particular group, experience, or community. By contrast, etic refers to a person’s outsider statuses. The concepts of emic and etic become of relevance to
a discussion of recruitment, since an individual’s insider knowledge may both facilitate and hinder recruitment efforts in a variety of ways.

However, before exploring the effects of emic and etic on our research programs, it is necessary to share our own insider and outsider statuses with regard to the topic of gay men’s body image. In doing so, we refer readers to other literature in which we share our respective identities in greater depth (Drummond 2006; Filiault & Drummond 2008). Murray Drummond is a heterosexual man in his 40s. He is a former Iron Man competitor, and has a primary research interest in men’s health. Shaun Filiault is an openly gay man in his late 20s, and is an American living in Australia. He previously played tennis at the state level in the United States, and is now a brown belt in a martial art.

One area in which emic and etic are important is with regard to accessing previously existing networks of individuals, and in negotiating with gatekeepers. For example, Shaun’s identity as an openly gay man with a history in tennis may have proved useful for his study regarding body image in gay tennis players (Filiault & Drummond 2008). For this study, Shaun engaged in individual interviews with several members of an all-gay tennis organisation in a major Australian city. Because of Shaun’s identity, he was previously aware of the existence of this group, which yielded a readily accessible cohort for his study about gay athletes. Moreover, because Shaun is a gay tennis player, the president of the group trusted Shaun to attend the organisation, based on an assumption that as a gay man, Shaun would not disrupt the safety many of the participants felt in being open about their sexuality while at the organisation’s tournaments. Further, the group president expressed faith that Shaun would keep confidential the identities of the men who attended the group, since not all of them were fully “out”. Thus, Shaun’s emic facilitated recruitment by making him aware of an existing cohort and allowed him to easily negotiate with gatekeepers. These findings reflect previous literature that indicates the presence of an openly gay researcher may be particularly advantageous when engaging in research with gay men (Kong, et al 2000).

By contrast, when commencing his research about gay men, Murray had to begin a conscious process of how to access this cohort of men. Due to his social identity as heterosexual, Murray was unfamiliar with existing social networks of gay men, nor some of the other venues that may facilitate recruitment. Because of this complexity, Murray contacted a local government-funded support centre for gay youth, which then lead him to an Internet bulletin board for gay men (as described earlier). Thus, Murray’s options for recruitment, at least initially, were limited. This difficulty raises questions regarding both replicability and validity. Because of Murray’s limited engagement with the gay community, the government-funded support centre and the Internet became the easiest sources of recruitment. However, as noted above, using the Internet may pose problems for replicability and data quality. Thus, Murray’s etic status led him to a recruitment strategy that has inherent methodological problems. Additionally, as noted above, gay men may be more open to disclose sensitive information with other gay men (Kong, et al 2000). With regard to validity, because his opportunities for recruitment were limited in his early studies on gay body image, Murray was required to accept for his study any self-identified gay men who volunteered. Whether these men actually shared a similar perspective on what it meant to be “gay” is uncertain, which could raise questions with regard to research validity.

Emic status, however, is not a panacea. As noted previously, men may be reluctant to participate in research with a male researcher (Oliffe & Mroz 2005). Furthermore, emic status may encourage a researcher to over-identify with participants, which may negatively
affect the quality of interview data. An example of this over-identification is demonstrated in an interview segment from Shaun’s research:

Setting: Outdoor café on the major street in a metropolitan “gay ghetto”
MIKE: And ... [stops and stares as an attractive man walks past] Wow, did you see him?
SHAUN: Yeah, wow.
M: He was hot.
S: I know! Did you see those arms?

As a fellow gay man, Shaun shared in Mike’s experience of commenting on an attractive man. However, by acknowledging that he also felt the passerby was attractive, Shaun may have affected the data by acknowledging what he, personally, finds attractive. This acknowledgement may have particular importance for body image research, which largely centres around perceptions of attractiveness. This exchange could have skewed the validity of the research (i.e. did the participant censor his perceptions of attractiveness to be more in line with that of the researcher?) and replicability (i.e. would similar data have been yielded if the passerby had not been seen?). These factors tie back to recruitment, because “Mike” was a member of a gay football team, several members of whom Shaun would be interviewing over a several day period. While Shaun’s emic status provided him knowledge of this team, and facilitated easy negotiation with the team coach for access, Shaun’s emic status may have also negatively influenced the data, because it is possible Mike shared this experience with other teammates would then later be interviewed. It is impossible to know if such an exchange occurred, rendering questionable the reliability of the data gleaned from later interviews.

As noted previously, this discussion of emic and etic does not disqualify insiders or outsiders from studying their own, or other, social groups. It does, however, require researchers to be critically self reflective in their practice, and examine the manner to which their emic or etic influences aspects of the research process, such as recruitment. We also need to consider that emic and etic status have both positive and negative consequences associated with analyses of data. While it is beyond the scope of this paper given its particular focus on recruitment, this element needs to be considered in future debates around the analyses of data with gay men.

Moving Forward

As the title of this manuscript suggests, the above discussion represents our “reflections” upon recruitment, and the manner in which we have engaged with recruitment in our own research. Rather than prescribing specific methods for finding participants, our experiences instead signal the need for enhanced researcher awareness and attention to recruitment when conducting studies. In particular, we suggest there is a need for enhanced attention to the manners in which recruitment – as a process – may influence the validity and reliability of the research by influencing the type and quality of data yielded. It may be the case, then, that, as investigators, we must devote more attention to descriptions of recruitment when

2 Pseudonym used to protect confidentiality.
writing about our research. Although we acknowledge that journal space is often limited, and writers often wish to devote more attention to findings than method, it has been the contention of this article that method is data, in that method directly influences the data we collect. The way forward, then, may call for researchers to become more reflexive in their practice, and acknowledge that the manner in which we find participants can be just as important as the words the participants choose to share.

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