Research and evaluation with hard to reach groups: key challenges and strategies

Dr Ania Wilczynski and Alison Wallace

Ania Wilczynski
aniaw@urbisjhd.com
Alison Wallace
awallace@urbisjhd.com
Urbis Keys Young

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Abstract

Research clients in both the government and non-government sectors increasingly require that end-users are consulted in the course of research. In some instances research is required with community members, consumers and users of government services who are 'hard to reach' and often need to be consulted about very sensitive or difficult topics. This presents a number of ethical, practical and methodological problems for the researcher. In this paper we discuss various examples of research projects requiring consultations of this nature.

These projects include:

- several examples requiring opportunistic sampling ie where end-users of a service need to be consulted but the service has no way of contacting them to invite them to participate in consultations
- a major study of homophobic violence and hostilities against gay men and lesbians in NSW
- a project researching the needs of women who experience domestic violence but do not use crisis services or report the violence to police.

The paper discusses: the methodological difficulties involved in the projects, the strategies we used to effectively address these in practice (and the rationale for this), and any particular challenges in practice.

1. Introduction

Imagine you're a researcher and a client says to you any of the following:

- We want you to talk with clients of a telephone crisis counselling service to find out what they think about the service. These clients ring in to the service on an ad hoc basis at all hours of the day and night. The service doesn't have any records of the contact details for these clients.

- We want you to consult with gays and lesbians in the general population about their experiences of homophobic violence and harassment. We want you to make sure you include a wide range of people, including gays and lesbians living in country towns, Aboriginal gay men, gay men and lesbians who are parents and Asian gay men. Many of these people will not have reported their experiences of abuse.
- We want you to talk to women who have experienced domestic violence, but who have never contacted a domestic violence service, or contacted the police. We want you to talk to Aboriginal women who have never spoken about this before, and women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and recently arrived migrants who are in this situation.
- We want you to talk to men who have assaulted their partners and been through a domestic violence perpetrator program, and ask them how often they've engaged in a broad range of abusive behaviours over specific time periods.

These are all examples of projects requiring research with community members, consumers and users of government services who are 'hard to reach' and often need to be consulted about very sensitive or difficult topics. This presents a number of ethical, practical and methodological problems for the researcher. With research clients in both the government and non-government sectors increasingly requiring that end-users are consulted in the course of any research, challenges such as these are becoming more and more common.

In our paper today we would like to discuss the issues involved in conducting research of this nature, particularly projects where standard recruitment strategies cannot be adopted.

We will do this by briefly describing a number of projects our firm has conducted, including:

- the methodological difficulties involved in the project
- the strategies we used to effectively address these in practice, and the rationale for this
- any particular challenges in practice.

First we will discuss several evaluations which have required 'opportunistic' sampling of clients who have only transitory contact with the service being evaluated. We will then describe the consultations required for two other projects we referred to at the beginning of this paper, namely:

- gay men and lesbians about their experiences of homophobic abuse and harassment
- women who have experienced domestic violence but never contacted the police or a domestic violence service, about their help-seeking strategies and needs.

2. Opportunistic sampling

Opportunistic sampling involves consultations with end-users of a service where that service has no way of contacting the end-users to invite them to participate in

consultations. These end-users will typically have had only fleeting or ad hoc contact with a service and the service does not have records of those it has worked with.

In this situation the researcher must find ways to catch clients during or immediately after their contact with the service. If these clients do agree to participate in research consultations, they will usually only be willing to do so for a very short period of time.

Examples where we have successfully consulted in this way include:

- Aboriginal young people who are picked up by a night patrol bus in Alice Springs and returned to their homes – we profiled this service as an example of good practice in Aboriginal juvenile justice. An Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal researcher spent one night on the bus talking to clients.
- Clients of two telephone counselling services, Lifeline and Mensline, as part of a national review of tele and web counselling in Australia.
- Drug-users who use various needle exchange programs we have evaluated.

In the last two examples we attended the services themselves and they asked clients at the end of the contact whether they were willing to talk to our researcher for a short time immediately after this. For the needle exchange programs, we attended both fixed and mobile services.

There are a number of key strategies that must be considered in conducting this type of research. These include that the researcher needs to:

- ***Effectively use the service provider as the crucial gatekeeper to facilitate access to clients and encourage their participation in research consultations***. This can be a critical factor in either facilitating or obstructing the research. This process includes establishing as rigorous a process as possible in the circumstances for determining which clients we access (eg accessing a random sample of clients) as well as seeking service providers' advice about what is going to be the most effective way to consult with clients. For instance for the telecounselling review, telephone counsellors were requested to ask clients at the end of their consultations whether they would be willing to speak to us, but only if they felt the client was not too distressed. Around a third of the potential pool of interviewees was filtered out as being too distressed. This approach generally worked very well.
- ***Be extremely flexible and informal*****,** and undertake the consultations in a way which is feasible and acceptable to the end-user and service within the multiple practical constraints created by the situation. This flexibility and informality may relate to a number of aspects of the consultations, such as:
  - *Timing of the consultations*. For instance in consulting drug-users of needle exchanges and crisis line clients, we went into the service premises at various times of the day – including both day and throughout the night since for both types of projects night-time was a popular time for clients to contact the services.
  - *How the consultations are conducted*. For example in the case of the Aboriginal night patrol, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researcher who were involved in the consultations dressed casually. Initially both researchers sat in the front of the bus, and then the Aboriginal researcher moved into the back of the bus to have informal short chats to the young people as this

seemed a more effective way to develop rapport with the young people. We did not use a question guide or take any notes at all during the consultations, as this would have been offputting to the client group, particularly since they have often had contact with numerous official agencies. As is typically the case with opportunistic interviewing generally, the consultations were conducted as informal conversations rather than interviews as such. The researchers then debriefed together immediately after the consultation and made notes from memory.

- ***Design the research consultation so that it is very short*** – it is no use having a list of 30 questions to get through. For all of the examples we've given, the consultations were generally for five or ten minutes only. It is important to keep the questions very short and straight-forward, identify the most crucial things to talk to clients about, and at the same time consider the usual rules for research consultations such as having at least some 'warm up' questions. However even in a short timeframe it can be possible to cover key areas of interest. For instance for the telecounselling service consultations, clients were asked general questions about how satisfied they were with the service as well as being taken through a very short quality of life scale which asked clients to provide responses based on how they would have answered before and then after their contact with the service.

Opportunistic interviewing has several advantages such as:

- ***It allows access to clients who may well be impossible to consult with otherwise***.
- ***It allows clients to be accessed in a constrained time period and reasonably time-efficient manner*** for services with a reasonably high volume of clients. For example for the two tele counselling services, we were able to speak to 45 clients for between five and seven minutes each in a total period of 80 hours.
- ***Being onsite allows for other informal data gathering observations and activities***, including getting a very 'hands on' view of how the service works in practice, and informal consultations with staff. For instance for the telecounselling review, our researcher talked informally to a number of counsellors and administrative staff in the 'down time' between client calls.

On the other hand, there are some limitations to opportunistic consultations also, such as:

- ***The quality of the data can be much more variable*** when the consultations are conducted in less than ideal circumstances such as this and in such a short timeframe.
- ***The sample size can be unpredictable*** and you have to take whatever you can get at the time.
- ***The clients may become distressed in the course of the interview and the consultation may need to be terminated***, with appropriate referrals to support services. With the telecounselling review another advantage of being onsite was that this allowed for immediate referral to a telephone counsellor in the small number of instances where this was required.

3. Project Example: Homophobic Violence Against Gay Men and Lesbians

Another project which involved consultations with a 'hard to reach' group was a major study on homophobic violence and hostilities against gay men and lesbians,

conducted for the NSW Attorney General's Department. There were some key challenges in designing an appropriate methodology:

- An ongoing issue with research design relating to gay men and lesbians is that the parameters of the population are unknown. We therefore had to identify the most effective channels to access this group. We also wanted to ensure we heard from gay men and lesbians who were not publicly open about their sexuality as well as those who were 'out'.
- The topic we were wanting to ask people about was a very sensitive one. We knew that if the people we consulted had experienced violence and harassment, they may not have reported it.
- We wanted to access as large and broad a sample of the NSW gay and lesbian population as possible. The previous major study which had been conducted of homophobic violence in NSW, the *Out of the Blue* survey in 1994, had a sample size of around 300 people, so we wanted to get at least this number.
- In addition, we wanted to ensure that we included very specific sub-groups of the gay and lesbian population such as Aboriginal people, people from CALD backgrounds, and gay men and lesbians who are parents. The previous literature on homophobic violence has not adequately dealt with the experiences of particular sub-groups such as these.

The methodology we adopted consisted of two complementary strategies: a State-wide self complete survey, followed by eight focus groups with particular sub-groups.

To distribute the survey we used a variety of approaches:

- We hosted a copy of the survey on-line. We knew from previous research that a high proportion of the gay and lesbian population has access to the internet.
- We secured the support of a wide range of community-based organisations and groups, including gay and lesbian as well as mainstream organisations such as women's health centres. These organisations provided considerable assistance in sending emails to members and colleagues, including providing links on websites and distributing hard copies of the survey forms.
- We also publicised the survey in the gay and lesbian media and some mainstream regional newspapers.

In total we achieved a very good response rate of 600 – twice the response rate of the prior *Out of the Blue* study. The internet survey was extremely popular, with around half of all responses coming in via this source. People with access to the internet evidently found the online form convenient and quick, and the relative privacy it provided was another bonus.

The survey stage was followed by a series of eight focus groups with specific sub-groups of the gay and lesbian population, identified through a range of gay and lesbian organisations and support groups. These included:

- Aboriginal gay men
- Aboriginal lesbians
- mature age lesbians and gay men
- young lesbians and gay men

- lesbian and gay parents
- Asian gay men
- gay men and lesbians of Middle-Eastern background
- gay men in western Sydney who did not work in professional jobs or have a university education.

These groups were selected taking into account two factors:

- sub-groups who we thought it was likely would face distinct issues in relation to abuse
- sub-groups who were not represented in large numbers in the survey eg as we had anticipated, only a small number of survey responses were received from Aboriginal people.

The only key limitation of the methodology adopted was that it was hard to contain the resources expended on the project in the survey distribution stage – the project generated such a high level of interest in the gay and lesbian population that it was quite resource-intensive responding to this interest in terms of, for example, people ringing up to request hard copies of the survey, gay and lesbian community groups requesting a researcher to come and explain about the project to their staff and so on.

The research produced some very interesting findings. These included that:

- High levels of the survey respondents had experienced homophobic abuse, harassment or violence, in various forms, with verbal abuse being the most common type experienced. Overall 56% of the sample reported some type of experience of abuse or harassment in the last year and 85% reported that they had ever experienced it. The figure of 56% was almost identical to that found in the previous *Out of the Blue* survey with half the sample, despite a decade of initiatives designed to address this issue.
- However, there was a much greater willingness to report abuse to the police by gay men and lesbians compared to the prior survey.
- The research also identified the myriad ways in which gay men and lesbians modify their behaviour on a day-to-day basis due to concerns about abuse, including decisions about clothing and appearance, where they go for leisure activities etc.

In addition the focus groups also helped tease out some of the very specific issues faced by particular sub-groups of the gay and lesbian population. We found a complex inter-relationship between culture and sexuality – for instance, lesbians and gay men of Middle Eastern background talked about difficulties seeking help from the police because they were not 'out' in their cultural community.

The research report, called *You Shouldn't Have to Hide to be Safe: Homophobic Hostilities and Violence Against Gay Men and Lesbians in NSW*, has been published on the internet, and has been very well-received in the gay and lesbian population. The Attorney General's Department is taking further action to highlight awareness of and act on the findings of the report.

4. Project Example: Researching the needs of women who experience domestic violence but do not use crisis services or report the violence to the police

A few years ago, the Federal Office of the Status of Women commissioned us to conduct a study '*to ascertain the reasons why the majority of women who experience domestic violence do not use domestic violence and related crisis services or contact the police, what actions they take in response to domestic violence, what are the needs of these women, and what would best meet their needs'*. The brief stipulated that these women had to include women living in rural/isolated parts of the country, women from CALD backgrounds, Aboriginal women and women with a disability.

The research challenge

The major research challenge involved in this project was to reach women who experience domestic violence but are not known to the police or domestic violence services, and who may not have sought help from any agency, nor even spoken about the violence to anyone before. In other words, we had to make these women 'visible' for the purposes of the research, and then encourage them to spend a fairly long time talking to us in some depth about their experiences of a very unpleasant and painful aspect of their life.

The challenge was all the more daunting because:

- Domestic violence is most often 'hidden' from public view.
- Women who experience domestic violence often feel considerable shame and embarrassment.
- Women in such a situation are often in a state of denial or disbelief, and do not 'label' or think of themselves as 'domestic violence victims'.
- They are also often depressed and experiencing high levels of stress.
- They may be socially isolated and have restricted access to the telephone or other means of communication.
- They may, quite simply, fear for their safety, especially if they are still living with the perpetrator.
- They may *never* have spoken to anyone before about the violence.

In other words, some of the very reasons that they may not seek help from crisis services or the police are the very same reasons why they are a 'difficult to reach' group for research purposes.

The research strategy

We developed a research strategy that proved to be successful in reaching the target group: 150 in-depth one-on-one interviews in total. The research strategy comprised a multi-pronged approach that included:

- a confidential, anonymous Phone-In held in three locations (Rural South Australia, the NT and Western Sydney)

- face-to-face and telephone interviews with women identified through a range of community networks and organisations
- in-depth interviews with a range of service-providers and professionals.

The *phone-in* was held over two days in each of the target areas, and ran for 12 hours each day. Three 1800 lines were dedicated to the phone-in, each staffed by a researcher highly experienced in interviewing women in domestic violence situations.

An extensive communications strategy was devised to publicise each phone-in, including:

- A large poster was designed (with a tear-off fringe containing the 1800 number) and distributed to close to 1,000 organisations/agencies in the three locations including childcare centres, community health centres, GP surgeries, major shopping centres, Bowling Clubs, community legal centres, migrant resource centres, drug and alcohol services, Centrelink offices, local community centres, and bus and railway stations.
- Media releases were sent to all local newspapers in the target locations, together with follow-up telephone calls to encourage the publication of articles on the study.
- Media releases were also sent to local radio stations, together with a community service announcement. Again telephone follow-up was made in each case to obtain further publicity.
- Nine on-air interviews were conducted with local radio station, by a member of the research team, highly experienced in domestic violence work and also in the media.
- Paid advertisements were placed in key local newspapers, as well as in the lesbian press in Sydney.
- In addition to the phone in, we contacted a wide range of community organisations to assist in finding women to participate in the study.
- Some 20 'key informants' from a variety of women's organisations were also interviewed in-depth. These services had contact with women who have experienced domestic violence and were well-placed to comment on the barriers such women face in being able to access help for domestic violence, why they elect *not* to seek help for domestic violence services or the police, and what strategies would be useful to assist women in this situation.

A number of other methodological points about this study are worth noting.

- Due to the stigma or confusion that can be attached to the term 'domestic violence', in preparing the publicity material for the study, a decision was made to not rely on that term alone, but to also use words like being 'abused', 'hit', 'hurt', 'frightened' or 'controlled' by their partner in an attempt to reach women who may not identify with the word 'domestic violence' but would recognise that they had been subjected to abusive behaviour of one sort or another.
- As the study progressed, it became increasingly apparent that the distinction between those women who had sought help from domestic violence and related crisis services, and those who had not, was often blurred. Thus, for example, the study established there were:

- women who had never sought help from domestic violence crisis services or the police
- women who had never sought help from domestic violence services, but had contacted the police, and women who had never contacted the police, but had used domestic violence services
- women who had never sought help from domestic violence services or the police *while they were living with their partner,* but who eventually did seek help from one or other of these services in relation to their ex-partner, either at the point of separation or post-separation
- women who did seek help from domestic violence or related crisis services but had managed or 'dealt with' the violence on their own for many years before
- women who *tried* to seek help from these services, but who for various reasons were unsuccessful in doing so (eg no places available, or physically stopped by the perpetrator).

Upon consultation with our client, it was decided that all these groups of women should be included in the study, with an emphasis on exploring how they 'managed' or 'coped' with the violence; who if anyone they told about the violence and why, and the helpfulness of their response; the role of friends and family; the 'turning points' that eventually led them to disclose and/or seek help; and any unmet needs and any barriers to accessing domestic violence crisis services – all key issues of relevance to the study.

- The brief for the study had specified that women who had used ethno-specific services or Aboriginal services should also be excluded from the study (as these could be construed as 'crisis' services for these communities). Our own experience confirmed that of other researchers and also practitioners in the field that thee was very little prospect of our reaching CALD or Indigenous women who had experienced domestic violence without using community contacts and networks, and that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible within the time and resources available, to find CALD and Indigenous women to interview who had *not* had some contact with an ethno-specific or Aboriginal organisation. It was therefore decided to include women who had had contact with migrant or Aboriginal services as long as *domestic violence was not the presenting problem*, even though at a later date, domestic violence may have been disclosed and/or help was sought.

The result

- The study was successful in reaching women who said they had *never* told anyone about the domestic violence before, women who had told family or friends *only*, and women who had sought help from various services but *not* from domestic violence services or the police. We also spoke to women who had *eventually used* crisis services, but had lived in an abusive relationship for a long period before reaching this stage.
- The research highlighted the fact that the concept of disclosure and help-seeking in the context of domestic violence is extremely diverse and complex. The study shed further light on the strategies women who experience domestic violence utilise to cope with, and try to resolve, the situation. In particular, the research directly challenged the common perception that women who experience domestic violence remain silent about the abuse. Most of the women interviewed *did* in fact tell others about, or seek help for, the abuse they were experiencing. However, the response they received was often inadequate.

- The study was influential in shaping government policy, in particular, targeting the friends and families of women in domestic violence situations for community education initiatives, and better equipping generalist services (such as GPs, drug and alcohol services, relationship and personnel counsellors, child specialists, psychologists, psychiatrists, baby health clinic staff etc) to identify and deal with disclosures of domestic violence.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are several points we would like to highlight about researching 'hard to reach' groups. These include:

- The approach always needs to be tailored to the particular group and aims of the research.
- A considerable amount of flexibility is required to ensure that the research fits in with respondent needs and preferences whilst also fulfilling the needs of the researcher. Flexibility is also required in the research approach adopted if a planned methodology does not work – there needs to be sufficient flexibility to try other means of providing access to the research target group.
- This type of research can be extremely resource-intensive, and require considerable administrative and organisational effort.
- While the role of the gatekeepers who facilitate access to research subjects is critical, they can both facilitate or obstruct the research process. Considerable time is often required to gain their trust and cooperation to assist the project and we believe there should be greater acknowledgement of the critical role they often play in the research process.
- A multi-pronged 'methodological triangulation' approach is preferable, to ensure that data is obtained from a range of sources where possible. This can help balance out the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches adopted. It can also at times be difficult to predict exactly how successful any individual approach might be – for example, using the internet as a means for people to access a survey.
- A multidisciplinary study team is often required to research 'hard to reach' groups. The projects described above, for example, involved not only skilled researchers and evaluators, but also practitioners experienced in working with the target group, culturally appropriate consultants (eg Indigenous consultants, gay/lesbian consultants) and people with skills in journalism and dealing with the media.