Recruitment as an Ethical Question: Lessons from a Project on Asexuality

Matt Dawson, Liz McDonnell, Susie Scott

Universities of Glasgow and Sussex

Abstract: This short piece considers how participant recruitment can have ethical elements. With reference to a qualitative research project on asexuality we explore the challenges associated with recruiting from an emerging, and politically charged, identity group. In our attempt to broaden the representation of asexual stories we sought to recruit people who may not fully identify with the emerging term 'asexual' as a sexual orientation while also not equating this with a lifestyle choice of abstinence. This was attempted through crafting suitable recruitment materials via the use of the Mass Observation archive and expanded sampling criteria. Our efforts met with mixed success, on which we reflect. We conclude by suggesting how such ethical questions related to recruitment will remain 'gaps' in ethical regulation, calling for a greater reflexive approach from researchers about sampling criteria.

Keywords: asexuality; ethics; Mass Observation archive; recruitment; sampling

Questions of participant recruitment can potentially be ethical questions. Designing our recruitment material and sampling frame requires, among the many ethical obligations of researchers, choosing a group of participants who, in a process of 'symbolic representation' are held to 'typify a circumstance or hold a characteristic that is expected or known to have salience to the subject matter' in which the highest level of diversity is maintained within the 'prescribed criteria' of the sampling unit (Ritchie at al. 2003:82-3). However, acknowledging this as an element of good research design simply returns us to determining the 'prescribed criteria' of our sampling unit. In the social sciences, this is likely to mean 'who is it you wish to speak to?'; in particular, who is of value for our research question(s)? This may be solved with reference to socially sanctioned criteria – for example, we may define 'children' as those in mandatory schooling or 'people living in poverty' with reference to statistical measures – but this is much more difficult to achieve when the prescribed criteria is a subjectively claimed identity charged with political, and ontological, questions of who belongs to that group. This means that while 'ethical issues are not the same as the practical problems' researchers encounter (Blaikie 2000:20), practical problems, such as the mechanisms of recruitment, can also have ethical components.

When discussing these ethical elements of recruitment, researchers have tended to discuss the role, and often the failings, of institutional ethical review panels. For example, McCormick et al. (2013:228) advocate flexibility in recruitment strategy rather than what they suggest is the tendency for review panels to 'stultify' recruitment strategies. From a different perspective, Graffigna et al. (2010) discuss the limits placed on recruitment by boards in different countries and their impact on research findings. Consequently, it has been claimed that when ethical questions influence recruitment this happens via review panels and is largely negative in its results. In particular, reviewers are seen to adversely limit the potential of researchers to recruit, for example, by focusing excessively on researcher safety or arguing that certain groups are too vulnerable to recruit via any mechanism. This may be done in order to avoid

reputational damage to the institution rather than due to purely research-related ethical issues (Hedgecoe 2016).

While the role of such review panels are important and continue to impact research they are only part of the picture. This short piece, in line with one of the themes of this special issue, is instead focused on a 'gap' in ethics regulation. Reflecting the distinction between the 'procedural ethics' dealt with an ethics review panel and the 'day-to-day ethical issues that arise in the doing of research', the 'ethics in practice', which may not be covered by such panels (Guillemin and Gilliam 2004:264) we will discuss how a practical question – the wording of recruitment material – can gain ethical, and political, dimensions. In particular we will discuss the challenges faced when seeking to expand and diversify the sample for an identity category primarily held by a certain sector of the population, some of whom are engaged in forms of identity politics. This will be discussed in relation to a research project on asexuality entitled 'A Qualitative Exploration of Asexual Identities and Practices of Intimacy', funded by the Leverhulme Trust (grant code RPG-2012-575). Who is included within the term 'asexual' would, as a procedural ethics question for a review panel, seem easily answered, but, when as researchers we confronted this question in practice, we discovered its ethical components. Significantly, we faced the quandary of achieving representation and diversity while seeking to recognise the political value of a clearly defined identity category for an emerging identity group subject to discrimination (MacInnis and Hodson 2012). While other writers have cautioned against attempts to assign participants to particular categories, due to fears of ascribing 'risk' to them (Plant and Rushworth 1998) or as reflecting a research power relationship found most notably in a colonial setting (Smith 1999), their arguments have primarily concerned classification 'from above', by researchers. Our focus instead was to recognise and respect a previously unavailable classification 'from below' which had been claimed by a group while also recognising that this term may not be known to all those who hold the orientation it describes. We will discuss the practical measures we took to achieve this, their successes and failures and conclude that some ethical issues in recruitment may inevitably have to be 'gaps' in research regulation.

Asexuality is a sexual orientation defined by the absence or low levels of sexual attraction/desire. Depending on how that term is operationalised, research suggests asexual people are between 1% and 6% of the population, though the lower figure, based as it is on self-identification, has been more readily accepted (Bogaert 2004; Poston and Baumle 2010). However, it is more appropriate to think of asexuality as a 'meta-category' (Chasin 2011) within which individuals identify across two axes: sexual desire and romantic attraction. This can create a diversity of identities such as sex-repulsed aromantic (with no sexual desire or romantic attraction) heteromantic asexual (romantic attraction to the opposite sex with no sexual desire) or panromantic demisexual (romantic attraction to all genders and the experience of sexual desire once a relationship develops) along with many others (Scherrer 2008). Therefore, to the extent we can speak of an asexual 'community', it is one marked by a high level of diversity concerning the identities claimed by its members (Carrigan 2011). It is also an identity which attracts radical political claims concerning its supposed subversiveness towards the dominant 'sexusociety' (Pryzbolo 2011).

Asexuality as a term emerged primarily in the early 2000s due in part to the development of online spaces dedicated to it. These spaces also allowed asexual people to virtually meet and organise politically. The most significant of these is the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN). Asexuality's prominence has also been aided by the visibility work of activists, emerging from AVEN and elsewhere (Kim 2010). Before this period, people who may now identify as asexual would not have had access to the term. Such individuals may have used different forms of subjective identification and/or have had externally attributed labels applied to them, such as cohabitating women said to be living sex-less 'Boston Marriages' (Rothblum and Brehony 1993).

Given the emerging nature of asexual identification, much of the research on asexuality has used AVEN to recruit participants. The benefits of this are clear. AVEN is the most prominent space – globally but especially for those who can read English – in which asexual people virtually meet. AVEN has also been eager to aid researchers via the development of guidelines for research and a team dedicated to assisting in such work (AVEN 2016). It could also be argued that there is political value in seeking to assist a group trying to establish their identity as legitimate. However, AVEN tends to be made up of a particular demographic: young, middle class women. It has been suggested that this group tends to have a particular conception of asexuality and its various component identities, different to those who are not frequent visitors to AVEN (Carrigan 2011). Therefore, while AVEN were kind enough to aid our recruitment on the project we were aware this was likely to only give us part of the picture of asexuality. In particular, it was likely to privilege those who eagerly identified with the term and marginalise those who may be asexual, in the sense of having the orientation that term describes, but, perhaps given their age and the newness of the term, may not readily identify with it.

Therefore, we faced what has been termed an 'ethically important moment' (Guillemin and Gilliam 2004) in our research. We had a duty of representation to reflect the lives of those who use AVEN and such online spaces which are important to asexual experience, and therefore to our project, while also being aware of how these do not reflect asexual experience comprehensively. As the statement of ethical practice from the British Sociological Association puts it, researchers have the responsibility to 'report their findings accurately and truthfully' (BSA 2002). In our case, the 'accuracy' of our discussion of the lives of asexual people required us to be aware of the potential specificity of those who use spaces such as AVEN, and those who do not. As White et al. (2003:290) put it, diversity and inclusivity in qualitative research necessitates 'reporting and explaining the untypical' as much as exploring dominant stories (see also Plummer 2001). Since some stories had become dominant in asexuality research, we were eager to also explore what had, to that point, been the 'untypical' stories of such research. Therefore, we decided to recruit more broadly. This included other online spaces, such as Tumblr, Twitter and a note attached to a Huffington Post piece along with recruitment via LGBTQ groups and the use of paper flyers posted in relevant local spaces. Here, however we faced the political and ethical issue hinted at earlier: we did not want, in seeking to broaden our sample, to equate asexuality as a sexual orientation with celibacy or abstinence by personal choice. This is especially the case when asexual advocacy has focused

so strongly on differentiating these two things and promoting the idea of asexuality as a sexual orientation (Kim 2010). While we would not call our population 'hidden' or 'hard-to-reach' (as will be seen below, we encountered too *many* potential participants) some of the key characteristics of such populations – most notably the lack of a pre-existing sampling frame and the potential stigma attached to the group (Heckathorn 1997:174) – could be seen to apply to asexuality (MacInnis and Hodson 2012). Consequently, we needed a form of words for recruitment materials which, while allowing those who may not readily identify as asexual to take part, did not take our project into a different, ethically and politically problematic, direction[1].

One way we decided to pursue this was for two of the research team (McDonnell and Dawson) to spend a day at the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex. Here we viewed directives which related to intimate and sexual issues dating back to the 1950s. The archive, and the ongoing project attached to it, has attracted increased interest in recent years as a tool for social science researchers (Casey et al. 2014), particularly as a method for the study of personal lives (May 2011). The archive's particular value for us was what has been called its 'dual vision' (Kramer 2014): that those responding to directives are both the observed, speaking about their circumstances in everyday language, and the observers, who are generating lay sociological insight. Our goal was to see if any particular forms of words were consistently used, in referring to the author or others they knew, which discussed what would now be termed asexuality. While the responders to Mass Observation directives cannot be taken as representative of the population as a whole – and even within this population asexual people make up a small number – we were only hoping for small indications of the language used by and about these groups in an earlier period, not a reflective account of their experiences.

We found no consistent terminology in the archive, which partly explains why the term asexual emerged to fill this gap. There was a scattered use of terms such as 'celibate' and 'abstinent', but these were sometimes used more broadly, to refer to a choice (for example, due to religious beliefs). Or, there were oblique references, such as the respondent to a 2005 directive who suggested their husband was 'never highly sexed' or another who said of sex that 'this area of life for me perhaps has not been as open as maybe it could or should have been'. While these responses were clearly interesting and do seem to hint at a fascinating project researching narratives on the absence of sex in intimate relationships, they were not especially helpful in terms of providing us with terms for recruitment material.

Therefore, given the lack of a consensus term emerging from the archive and the clear everyday – and politically problematic for our project – connotations attached to terms such as 'celibate' and 'abstinent', we decided to use the following text for our recruitment material:

Are you someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction or desire?

Maybe you identify as an 'asexual person'?

Or do you feel that the word 'asexual' describes you in some way?

This choice of words indicates the conflicting issues we had to contend with as researchers. As suggested above, we were interested in the experiences of those who did explicitly identify as asexual and, given that we did not know how successful our recruitment from spaces such as AVEN would be, we wanted to take all opportunities to recruit this group. Additionally, we wished to seek the aforementioned non-identifiers with the term asexuality, who, nevertheless, had the orientation the label describes. Given the constraints of language and the ethical and political issues mentioned above, we felt that opening with a discussion of what asexuality is used to describe, then having the identity be conditional ('maybe you identify', 'describes you in some way') was the most effective means to achieve this. We also did not wish to ascribe an asexual identity to our participants and claim that, regardless of how they identified personally, they were 'really asexual'. Of course, it was also possible that our use of the term asexual, even in a conditional way, may have put off potential participants less familiar with its use who otherwise may have been interested in participating in our research. However, given the above constraints, this was the most feasible wording.

Our efforts met with mixed, albeit in some ways positive, success. The first notable factor was the eagerness of participants to take part. Our various forms of recruitment attracted 172 expressions of interest (only 5 of whom did not meet the requirements for participation, due to being aged under 18) for a project originally designed to recruit only 30. It has been suggested that one of the key motivators for research participation is the hope of the research having a positive impact for the group concerned (Singh 2014), which also seemed to be a motivator here[2]. Having decided to expand the sample to 50, we then faced a further decision as to how to sample from this pool. We decided to first purposively recruit groups previously underrepresented in asexuality research (in this case, people over 30 and/or male) then use a random number generator to complete our sample. This not only reflects the aforementioned need for diversity within a sample, but also the ethical requirement on researchers for representation, in this case for stories not hitherto explored in asexuality research.

Despite this, our sample was not as reflective as we had hoped. Given the nature of our population and our use of a qualitative approach, we had not designed representative sampling criteria. As indicated above, when we had to narrow our potential participants to a pool we took the opportunity to select participants otherwise not discussed in asexuality research. Our attempt to craft broad recruitment language was driven by the same desire. But, given that we recruited by a mix of theoretical and purposive sampling in which we also used elements of probability sampling we did not have the goal of a perfectly balanced sample. Nevertheless, the biases in our sample were particularly noteworthy. Of the 50 participants, all but five responded with some form of asexual identity when asked for their sexual identity on a self-completion demographic questionnaire[3] – though, as we discuss below, the act of writing an identity on the questionnaire did not equate to an unproblematic embracing of it in everyday life. Furthermore, 38 were under 30 years of age and only eight identified as 'male' or 'cis-male'[4]. Therefore, in one sense, our attempt to obtain maximum diversity within the ethical and political confines of a proclaimed identity was not successful. As we have suggested elsewhere (Dawson et al. 2016), given that this skewed sample, especially regarding age, is mirrored in other studies, it would seem reasonable to suggest that it reflects those who are

likely to identify as asexual. This can partly be explained by the term emerging primarily online.

Nevertheless, the limited diversity we did manage to obtain allowed for stories not otherwise told to be expressed. We have discussed these elsewhere including the subset of our sample for whom asexuality, even if they happily reported this on their demographic questionnaire, was a 'non-identity' of no particular significance and not worthy of much conversation; as Trevor put it 'I don't need to go on at people that I really, really like pizza!' (see Scott et al. 2016). It also allowed us to speak of the intersecting forms of marginalisation/exclusion felt by asexual people outside of the demographic usually found in online spaces such as AVEN. An example of this was the case of 59 year-old Ella who questioned whether her exclusion from conversation at a wedding was due to her asexuality or being a single, older woman (Dawson et al. 2016).

Given our concern with broadening our sample it was significant that our findings also suggested we should be careful not to imagine that the claiming of a classification becomes an all-defining part of an individual's lives. Our participants viewed asexuality as: a 'non-identity'; a usual way to describe themselves to others; a key part of their identity; a means of queer identification; and all points between. Indeed, some participants saw it as more than one of these. Furthermore, our results led us to recognise that some of the challenges of asexual personal lives, while often framed in terms of the person's asexuality, were not problems only experienced by asexual people (for example, engaging in sex for the 'good of the relationship', see Dawson et al. 2016). While it is difficult to draw a direct line between our attempts to diversify our sampling strategy within ethical and political limits and the sample we were actually able to obtain, it seems reasonable to assume that the various sources of recruitment may have assisted.

We suggest that there are six lessons to be taken from our experiences during this project. Firstly, to return to the opening point of this paper, we should be aware that recruitment questions can also be ethical questions concerning who 'counts' for a project. Secondly, that such questions can fall in the 'gaps' not covered by ethical regulation. This is not a call for regulation to fill this gap. It is not clear, at least in this case, how further ethical regulation would have clarified these issues. Rather, as a question of 'ethics in practice', this was best solved by the reflexivity from us as researchers that has been called for on such issues (Guillemin and Gilliam 2004). Thirdly, these ethical questions are linked to a further ethical obligation upon researchers which is beyond the reach of ethical review boards: the need to seek to represent our participants to the full. It was this demand – which we would suggest is about ethics as well as validity – which initially raised the need for us to shape particular recruitment criteria. We have also followed this ethical demand through by reporting our findings back to our participants along with AVEN and LGBTQ societies. Fourthly, while the Mass Observation archive was not especially useful in our case, we would recommend it to researchers interested in seeing how different groups may describe certain characteristics. This may be especially useful for recruiting participants less involved in online spaces. Fifthly, we should recognise that classification of a sample works at different levels. There is a need, for the purpose of sampling, to delineate your population. This, inevitably, involves a process of

including some and excluding others. In this process, we should be aware of the ethical questions that could occur and engage in the reflexive questioning suggested above. Once that is completed, the ways in which participants negotiate these classifications, including the role of significant others, requires researchers not seeking to universalise a particular classification as an all-defining attribute of those participants. Finally, any turn towards an educative approach in relation to ethical issues needs to recognise that such questions can be linked to political and ontological questions concerning who counts as part of a research sample.

Notes

1. This is not, of course, to suggest that the stories of those who actively choose celibacy are not of interest to researchers, rather that this was not the focus of our project.
2. Participants were also given a £10 voucher for taking part in the project, though they were not aware of that when they initially expressed an interest.
3. Of those 5, 4 offered no answer and 1 wrote 'me'. Part of the reason for this questionnaire being self-completion was to allow for the diverse forms of identification within and beyond 'asexuality' already discussed. We also had a list of forms of support available – broken down into: 'someone to talk to'; asexuality-specific; and domestic violence support – for all participants. While this is good practice generally for qualitative research, especially one exploring intimate lives such as ours, we were aware our participants may be dealing with the emotional and psychological effects of (re)considering their sexual identity as a result of taking part in our project. Consequently, we considered it essential for such forms of support to be clearly highlighted to participants.
4. The term 'cis' is used to indicate a person identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth.

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