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Epidemic Academia:

The Challenges Faced when Conducting Research on Child Sexual Abuse During Covid-19

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Abstract

Covid-19 has seen additional pressures placed on already underfunded charities, which are forced to compete with one another for resources just as reports of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) during lockdowns are increasing. When researching CSA or other similarly sensitive subjects, researchers may decide to use charities as gatekeepers in recruiting participants, thus helping to mitigate the ethical challenges involved in research with vulnerable people. However, with charities facing higher demands for their services, it is often no longer possible for them to support research by acting as such gatekeepers. It is necessary, therefore, for researchers to be flexible and to adapt to these changes, whilst still prioritising the wellbeing of their participants. This paper, written and outlining experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, explores the challenges of recruiting participants through gatekeepers, using the author's personal experience of researching CSA as a case study, as well as the alternative steps taken to ensure that research aims are met.

Introduction

Research surrounding sensitive subjects such as Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) can be ethically challenging, especially when working with participants who have experienced such abuse (Bostock & Laws, 2017). This paper explores the challenges experienced when recruiting through gatekeepers, who, during Covid-19, have had limited resources and time to support research, and the alternative steps taken to help assist the recruitment of participants for research. It also looks at some of the positive impacts on research of adaptive and flexible recruitment strategies adopted and lessons learned as to how to potentially carry out research on sensitive subjects with participants in the future.

The emotional impact abuse can have on an individual's life may result in long-term emotional, physical and even financial challenges (Fergusson et al, 2013). With such a sensitive subject, it is of great importance to avoid causing undue distress to the participant or to re-traumatise them when discussing sexual abuse. The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse (Bostock & Laws, 2017) states that throughout the research it is the obligation of the researcher to ensure that participants do not experience unnecessary emotional harm. Researchers may therefore opt to recruit participants through sexual abuse charities, acting as gatekeepers, to mitigate their potential distress.

A gatekeeper is a person who 'controls access to an institution or an organisation' (Singh & Wassenaar, 2016: 42). Gatekeepers can help researchers access hard to reach or vulnerable participants, and can help to protect participants, particularly when involved in sensitive

research (Williams, 2020). With CSA being such a sensitive topic, it is often hard to identify those who have experienced sexual abuse during childhood, and thus they often remain hidden and can be difficult to contact. A gatekeeper, such as a CSA charity that works with victims and survivors of abuse may be able to help make contact with potential participants, as victims and survivors approach them. However, the use of gatekeepers in sensitive research, and the benefit to participants of using this method, is often missing from academic literature, despite its regular practice in research (Williams, 2020).

Research into sensitive subject areas has undoubtedly been impacted during the Covid-19 pandemic (Williamson, 2020). This impact can be seen in multiple ways, such as an increase in demand on specialist charities (Williamson, 2020) and a recorded increase in sexual abuse and violence within the home (Gov.uk, 2020; NSPCC, 2020). Consequently, specialist charities are seeing an 'increased demand' (Gov.uk, 2020: no pagination) and have no spare time to participate in research.

The second year of my PhD research coincided with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, requiring me to continually reassess my recruitment and research methods. I adapted my intended research plan to involve online semi-structured interviews with victims and survivors of CSA, exploring their experiences and evaluations of CSA prevention methods and 'recovery'. Covid-19 has brought with it various issues which have affected my research. This included critical funding issues for the charities I had hoped to use as gatekeepers and increases in their CSA caseloads, often due to the intensity of service users' mental health struggles. Together, these challenges prevented recruitment of participants completely through my previously selected method, requiring me to look at additional alternative options.

The impact Covid-19 has had on charities has affected how researchers like myself are able to conduct research. Necessary adaptations in recruiting and ensuring sufficient support for participants during my own research have highlighted positive as well as negative implications of adopting alternative approaches to obtaining results for analysis. These implications will be examined below, along with what steps have had to be taken to continue with the research, ensuring I could find a satisfactory number of participants to complete my research.

The Challenge: Recruiting Through Gatekeepers

Since the start of 2020, Covid-19 has had an impact on research, with charities facing additional pressure from an increase in demand for support (Gov.uk, 2020). Charities are finding it hard to cope with supporting even existing victims and survivors of abuse and this struggle is exacerbated by additional cases of abuse seen during the lockdowns (NSPCC, 2020). Already thinly stretched, with resources frequently being cut, the £2.4 million the 2020 Conservative Government promised charities of sexual violence went to just eight charities: Safeline Warwick, National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC), Mothers of Sexually Abused Children (MOSAC), Mankind, Rape Crisis England and Wales, The Survivors Trust, Victim Support and Barnardo's (Gov.uk, 2020: no pagination), leaving over a further 112 sexual abuse charities without additional funding (The Survivors Trust, 2020).

Indeed, the NSPCC (2020) outlines how, during Covid-19, there has been an increase in CSA cases (Gov.uk, 2020). Meanwhile, MOSAC reports that their CSA helpline calls more than doubled during the first lockdown in 2020 (Gov.uk, 2020) and Childline states that it has seen three times more children contact them about CSA within the family since the start of the first

lockdown on the 23rd of March 2020 (NSPCC, 2020: 1). These changes to society and the charity sector have resulted in the need for researchers into CSA to carefully consider alternative means of accessing participants and even conducting research, whilst remaining cautious in ensuring participants do not experience any triggering or harm. Simply, the financial support offered by the Government is insufficient to allow charities to support the volume of victims and survivors who contact them, let alone reach out to those in need but unaware of their services. This underfunding has caused additional challenges for charities, who are having to compete with each other for scant financial resources (Clay & Collinge, 2020; Third Sector, 2020).

One direct consequence I found that this situation had on my research into CSA is that charities have less capability to support research as gatekeepers. Of the 120 sexual abuse charities included in The Survivors Trust (2020) list, 84 met my gatekeeper criteria of working with victims and survivors of CSA. I emailed the 84 charities, asking if they could contact existing and former service users whom they believed would be able to participate in my research and inform them of my interest in their experiences. Of the charities contacted, 62 replied but, of these, 57 stated that they were unable to participate in my research as gatekeepers, on account of their already being overstretched with time commitments and struggling to support all the victims and survivors who contact them. Two charities even stated that they were having to close down due to the lack of funding. Twenty-two charities reported being inundated with new CSA victim referrals on top of their existing clients, meaning that they were struggling to cope during Covid-19. Thus, since this intended recruitment method of relying on charities to act as gatekeepers had elicited insufficient participant commitment, I had to be proactive and quickly find a different recruitment method to utilise, potentially also adapting my research questions (Blaikie, 2009).

The Need for Adaptive Responses

Recruitment Method

The limitations of my previously adopted recruitment method of approaching participants through CSA support charities acting as gatekeepers (Henry, 1990; Blanton et al, 2006), exacerbated by the additional constrictions of Covid-19, impacted how many participants I could recruit. I considered all other possible alternative options, such as utilising connections already made through voluntary work and previous employment within the sector as well as recruiting through online platforms. Colleagues also working in the sector of child protection or victim/survivor support were experiencing similar challenges to the charities I had contacted, thus making this a nonviable recruitment method. Whitaker et al (2017) show how health researchers have successfully recruited hard to reach populations through social media and I thus decided to explore online recruitment further. Online recruitment may be done through social media sites such as Twitter or Facebook (Whitaker et al, 2017) or through support pages which state that they welcome researchers and recruitment.

Having identified CSA support pages online, I quickly learned that, although support pages for some subjects may welcome researchers, I was unable to find any CSA support website that allowed researchers to recruit through them. This is completely understandable, as members of such sites join them for community support and may find research traumatising or distressing. Using pages where victims and survivors were seeking support and advice for recruitment felt ethically questionable and I decided instead to look to social media platforms

such as Twitter and Facebook on which to put out a call for participation, since their service users were likely to be less vulnerable, the purpose of such sites not specifically being designed to support victims and survivors.

I decided against recruiting through Facebook. The two types of pages I came across on Facebook were, firstly, generic pages based on topic, activity or location and, secondly, support groups designed primarily for the support of victims and survivors. Facebook pages devoted to CSA survivors, like the CSA support websites above, specifically prohibited research recruitment and, due to the sensitive nature of CSA and the potential to distress Facebook users in generic group pages, I felt it inappropriate to put out a call for participants through these. Twitter, however, I found easier to recruit through, with the ability to 'follow' others with a similar interest area (Whitaker et al, 2017), creating a small network of people with a personal interest in CSA. I set up a Twitter account for the research, through which I put out a call for participants. This recruitment method proved a greater success, providing a satisfactory number of participants for my research (12 in total).

Sampling Criteria

My lack of success in initially attempting to recruit all my participants using CSA charities as gatekeepers appeared not only to do with their limited availability; it also reflected the limitations of the sampling criteria I had selected and the ages of victims and survivors when they first approach charities for support. I had anticipated interviewing young people, aged 18-24 years, but charities quickly came back to me to explain that their average service user's age was closer to 45, with people often not contacting support charities until later on in their lives (O'Leary & Barber, 2008). This was something I had not previously considered. I therefore deemed it advisable to widen my participant criteria to victims and survivors over the age of 18 who had experienced sexual abuse as a child. Ensuring that the participant criteria was as broad as possible increased my opportunities for recruitment.

Listening to the reasons given by prospective participants for their turning down the invitation to be involved in the research as it was first presented to them enabled adaptations to then be made in order to make it possible for such excluded individuals to take part. Some participants had to cancel planned interviews on several occasions due to poor health, explaining that their physical or mental health challenges meant that they would be unable to provide a guaranteed time when they could participate. I had to take an adaptive approach to include these participants in the research and as such we agreed to delay the interview until such a time when they themselves felt well enough to undertake the interview, agreeing that they could contact me on the day, or even at the time, to be interviewed.

This more flexible approach, interviewing at a moment's notice, enabling the participants to determine the schedule, proved helpful, and was not something I had previously considered or seen in the literature. It demonstrated the importance of being willing to adapt to the needs of my participants rather than conform to traditional power-infused research practices, in which the researcher often states the necessity for themselves of a fixed time for the interview. Such an approach values the researcher's time and convenience over the needs of the participants. This power dynamic then follows through to the interview, impacting how comfortable the participant feels and how they respond to the power asymmetry at play (Anyan, 2013). Vähäsantanen and Saarinen (2012) found that the activities surrounding the interviews and the setting in which the interviews were held, affected how participants felt, what they were comfortable sharing with the interviewer, and thus the data produced. It stands to reason, therefore, that the lack of consideration with regard to the participant's time

commitment needs may not only exclude the participant from the research but, if they are able to participate, also affects their perception of the power dynamics in the interview process and, thus, their entire contribution to the research and its data.

A Brief Evaluation of the Chosen Alternative Methods and their Impacts

Without the support of specialist CSA charities acting as gatekeepers to offer advice or assistance to participants while undertaking the research, it was more challenging to identify participants who could be deemed sufficiently resilient to be able to take part in the research. Therefore, extensive consideration as to direct participant support was given, maintaining the wellbeing of all participants throughout my research as an absolute priority (Bostock & Laws, 2017). To help mitigate potential harm and distress caused by the research, I provided all potential participants with a clear and detailed participant information form to help them assess for themselves whether the research was suitable for them to take part in or not.

Whilst CSA victims and survivors could be deemed 'vulnerable' due to the abuse they experienced, it is important to still allow them to assess the risk to themselves, as Alexander et al (2018) found when reviewing vulnerable people's experiences of participating in research (Bracken-Roche et al, 2016). Often extra precautionary measures can be taken to help protect vulnerable participants (Alexander et al, 2018). Potential participants were provided with all the information about the research and were thus able to make a fully informed decision about participating. Furthermore, it was established, prior to each interview, that the respective participant had access to support, should the interview, or memories triggered by it, prove distressing. This support was ascertained through discussion about support groups or therapy that participants currently attend, if necessary, providing them with a list of support charities which could offer continued support.

Twitter, as a recruitment tool, brought with it both additional challenges and unexpected benefits. The LSE (2017) found that 18-29 year olds comprise the largest age demographic using Twitter, narrowing the likely age of participants recruited through this means. The use of Twitter to recruit participants also excludes anyone who does not use social media or prefers to use other platforms and therefore did not see my call for participation, which drastically limits the representation of my participants, with most being from a similar age group and racial background. Recruiting through Twitter also made it difficult to elicit potential participants' trust. Due to the sensitive nature of the research subject, and without the assistance of CSA charities acting as gatekeepers, it proved difficult to assure many potential participants of my credibility, which may have also impacted who participated in my research. However, the research being qualitative in nature and focussed on exploring individuals' experiences, these limitations of representation of varied backgrounds, whilst acknowledged, did not prevent my research achieving its goal of constituting a deep exploration of victims' and survivors' experiences to identify any repeating themes or experiences (Blaikie, 2009).

There were also specific strengths associated with using Twitter as a recruitment method (Whitaker et al, 2017). By using a 'call for participation' on Twitter, potential participants were able to contact me to state their interest in participating or for further information instead of potentially feeling pressured into participating in research, which may have been the case, had they been approached by a gatekeeping organisation. Using Twitter also allowed for the inclusion of participants who had not previously contacted CSA charities. This provided me

with a chance to ask participants why they had not contacted a CSA charity, if, indeed, this was the case – a theme that I had not previously considered but proved illuminating. Additionally, as discussed above, the charities I spoke with often suggested that the average age of victims and survivors who contact them were 45 years, meaning that younger participants were less likely to be recruited through CSA charities, whereas Twitter offered a higher chance of recruiting younger participants.

Impact on the Findings

After realising the limitations of my previously planned recruitment method and adapting to these circumstances by also seeking participants through Twitter, I was able to recruit sufficient participants for my research (12 in total) to assure me that all possible themes and trends of victim/survivor experience had been successfully identified. My participants varied in background, experience, ethnicity and gender and the data produced more than adequately answered my research questions. I found that by ensuring a broader age range I obtained a more comprehensive understanding of victims'/survivors' experiences.

The adaptive approach I found necessary to apply to my recruitment method also carried over into the interviews I conducted. I conducted two sets of interviews with each participant and found that my interviews didn't feel rushed and my participants were able to talk about and explore areas that they felt were important. I originally envisaged using a semi-structured interview format, having some set questions and allowing participants to explore what they found relevant or interesting. But, by being more open during the interview, and not sticking to the semi-structured interview format but just letting participants talk, they felt freer and brought up important points which I had not previously considered. The informal structure created a more personal atmosphere and lent itself to opportunities for developing trust and sharing meaningful, deep-felt feelings and experiences which I had not previously seen in the literature relating to the field.

Conclusion

Research into Child Sexual Abuse and other similarly sensitive subjects has often relied on charities and other organisations to help support research, particularly when making contact with often very hidden communities (Williams, 2020), by acting as gatekeepers and ensuring that participants are supported. The pressures of Covid-19, however, have overstretched CSA charities' resources (Gov.uk, 2020; Third Sector, 2020) and necessitated the adoption of alternative participant recruitment strategies. The personal recruitment of participants, via online social media platforms, offers the advantages of the increased convenience of home-based participation and the possibility of increased flexibility as to time and date, broadening the range of contributing participants and, thus, the inclusive scope of the research as a whole (Henry, 1990; Blanton et al, 2006; Whitaker et al, 2017).

Researchers need to offer their prospective research participants flexibility in order to ensure that they are able to adapt to the ever-changing experiences of victims and survivors. I found it necessary to consider how the social environment was impacting my recruitment and research, having to adapt accordingly through widening my sample population and introducing a new recruitment method whilst still ensuring that I was able to answer my research questions. Sensitive research topics require creative and adaptive recruitment

methods while prioritising the wellbeing of all participants, allowing for more robust data from participants who may have been excluded from contributing to research by more traditional methods of investigation.

Researching CSA during the Covid-19 pandemic forced me to be creative and more flexible with my approach due to charities' time limitations and their resources being brought to breaking point. This process, however, has taught me the importance of being reflective throughout my research, continually asking what is best for my participants and adapting to their needs, especially during the interview stage. Conducting qualitative research has allowed me to be as flexible as I felt was appropriate and to respond flexibly to the social challenges which have affected both my gatekeepers and my participants, allowing for continuous shifting and adaptation throughout the research. This new approach has allowed me to gather the in-depth data I was aiming to produce, as well as revealing new themes I had not previously discovered in the literature surrounding CSA. These positive outcomes of a creative and sympathetic response to the challenges of Covid-19 have taught me valuable lessons which I will be applying to my future research.

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