To bin or not to bin

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Essay

To Bin or Not to Bin?

The research limitations sections of academic articles are littered with a desire for a more diverse sample and how this diversity might be able to illuminate different consumption experiences rather than those of a predominantly middle-class cadre of consumers. Consumer researchers are increasingly interested in studying different aspects of hard-to-reach, or marginalised populations, such as poor migrant women living in squats[1], homeless individuals[2], and low-income families experiencing relative poverty[3]. However, access to these hard-to-reach populations is limited and methodologically challenging.

Consumer researchers have maligned the insufficient attention given to understanding the lives of the poor[4], and in this essay, we outline a recent research project where we were outsiders and our efforts to engage with a more diverse sample, chiefly, people living and working in socially and economically deprived regions of a city in the UK was revealing, and also challenging. OECD figures (2021) suggest that the UK has among the highest levels of income inequality in Europe (as measured by the Gini coefficient)[5]. This supports findings from the Social Mobility Commission (2019) that states that inequality is now entrenched in Britain from birth to work, and huge disparities in income and prospects exist in the UK. Only 32% of people from working class backgrounds secured professional jobs and those from working class backgrounds earn 24% less a year than those from professional backgrounds[6]. Some of the areas of the city where we sought participants for our study, aligned to the OECD and Social Mobility Commission's findings on inequality. In this essay we present a candid account of our experiences of largely being outsiders to these communities and our efforts to engage and recruit participants was far from the normalised

accounts that are commonly presented in consumer research. Our attempts to engage with participants comprised of awkward encounters, perceptions of power in-balances, persistence, surreal encounters, researcher vulnerability, rejection, warmth, sadness, and confronting failure.

Photo: On the streets – Food waste bins

It started on a fine, crisp spring morning, when we received communication from the city council to inform us that households and flats across four trial areas of the city where we all worked, had been selected to take part in a weekly household food waste recycling trial, lasting three months. All households and flats in the food waste trial areas were set to receive a 5-litre kitchen caddy, a larger outside food waste bin, biodegradable liners, and instructions on how to use them. We were invited to conduct a study aimed at building an understanding of consumers' attitudes and behaviours towards food and waste. We enthusiastically set to work on the project.

The city where the food waste trial commenced is not a monolithic area and there are wide disparities in the city across a broad range of socio-economic indicators, including poor life expectancy in parts of the city. Life expectancy in some of the economic and socially deprived areas of the city ranges from 75.0 for men and 77.8 for women, compared to 83.8 for men and 89.2 for women in the more affluent wards of the city[7]. There are also a range of wider health and wellbeing challenges and high rates of mental health problems, including depression, and severe concentrations of poverty.

Two of the food waste trial areas in the study are relatively affluent, with large concentrations of middle-class housing. The streets are lined with moss-covered trees, and parks and green spaces abound. The neighbourhoods host an eclectic mix of shops – fashionable and niche mainly. The high streets are bustling with independent bistros and bars.

Photo: A more affluent trial area

In contrast, the other two trial neighbourhoods are considered to be socially and economically deprived with a high density of council and social housing. Whilst most of the population here are born locally and white, ethnic minorities are also part of these working-class communities since post-war migration. In the 1950's and 60's, immigrants from Commonwealth countries began to be invited by Britain to fill labour shortages caused by World War II and many Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Indians, and Yemenis began to immigrate to the UK, finding jobs in the steel factories of Yorkshire. They settled in these communities, to be close to the factories they would be working in. However, today, industry is sparse or non-existent in these regions. Diversity has also increased in these areas, due to European migrants and asylum seekers. Post war housing solutions included high-rise flats and they continue to dominate the skyline in these areas. The barren high streets are dominated by boarded-up shops and pubs, and those that are still trading tend to be pound shops, charities, kebab bars and bookies. The local community centres have multifaceted functions, operating as a hub for community meetings and gatherings, and transforming into food and warm banks. Visiting the local corner shops reveals a lack of food produce being stocked or sold. Instead, lottery tickets, discounted alcohol, vapes and electricity cards are the shop staples.

Photo: Economically deprived trial area

The inclusion of more marginalised consumers might enable us shed light on issues and attitudes towards food habits and waste that are perhaps different to more affluent consumers. We were interested in their possible concerns for the environment, cultural practices around food consumption and waste, and to develop a better understanding of austerity and the cost-of-living crisis related to their food consumption and waste. However, acquiring these participants was difficult and messy as we will detail below.

Initial Approach

We undertook a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, sending letters and participant information sheets to each house and flat taking part in the food waste scheme, equating to approximately 8,200 households. The aim was to recruit a roughly equal sample size in each of the four trial areas of the food waste scheme. Our selection criteria were based on recruiting participants who had received a food waste bin from the council in one of the four trial areas and we were conscious about wanting an equal representation of people living in these communities. We sought participants that were both engaging with the food waste bin, and those that were less enthused about using it. The call for participants letter and the information sheet outlined the details of the study, the data collection procedures (interviews and photos/visuals), ethical procedures and we acknowledged how the participants' time and input into this study was valuable for public policy decisions and wider academia.

No sooner had the letter dropped on the door mat, we received a flurry of enthusiastic responses from keen participants from the two affluent, middle-class districts. On one leafy, residential street in the trial area, the occupants were seemingly in a race with one another, all clamouring to demonstrate and discuss their symbolic capital around the newly acquired food waste bin. Our research was the talk of this neighbourhood, and it soon became apparent that

the capital acquired from the food waste bin had added to their lifestyle choices, which seemed to include shopping at Waitrose and listening to the Today show on Radio 4. On the other hand, we received zero interest from the two economically and socially deprived trial areas. Participant hesitancy is real, and we were conscious that residents were potentially wary of outsiders as these communities have been frequently stigmatised by parts of the British media. The lack of links to residents along with a perceived lack of normative similarities with people in these communities resulted in researcher exclusion and we were perceived as outsiders. We came to understand that perhaps, it's not the 'done' thing to talk or trust others who are perceived not to be like you. Individuals in these areas may also harbour concerns about privacy, and the involvement of the council (their landlord in many cases). This led us to consider whether participants had apprehensions about information being shared with official agencies.

Photo: Food waste bin in action

Revised Approach: Part 1

Two weeks into the twelve-week food waste scheme, and the data collection in the two affluent areas in the trial regions was now gathering pace. However, we had still received no interest from the socially and economically deprived districts. We tried a revised approach for recruiting samples from these areas. We became media whores, appearing on every local radio breakfast show, mid-morning broadcast and drive-time phone-in that would welcome us. We contacted reporters and promoted the food waste scheme and call for participants in local newspapers, blogs, and online forums and we witnessed a trickle of uptake.

Breaking down traditional barriers of “us” (academics/researchers) and “them” (participants/food waste bin users) was fundamental so we changed the tone of our communications, downplaying our academic credentials and titles, to humanise the communication message and ourselves. We joined several Facebook groups and forums and in perusing these online groups, we discovered that they played an important role in fostering a sense of community. These online groups ranged from neighbourhood watch, community allotment and garden hubs, local pub forums, a knitting tribe, park-watch, women’s groups, and various community centre forums. Unfortunately, cold messages fail to get past the group gatekeepers. We posted and sent messages to these various groups, tailoring the appropriateness of the message and tone, and we were constantly considering the need to address the individuals we aimed to recruit. Each post we sent was tense and exciting, as we waited online to see whether the administrator would approve our message. We were conscious that we didn’t just want to appear to be academic interlopers and although we had now dropped our academic titles, we were completely transparent about why we were seeking participation from underrepresented individuals and made this clear to the group administrator. We were mindful that participants may see their involvement as being fairly risky, and representations of their lifestyles and their estates being possibly portrayed negatively was not necessarily in their control. We wanted to counter possible perceptions that we as researchers were just conducting a tick box diversity exercise and we espoused the benefits of taking part in the research for those groups and for the community in the future.

The risk to the project was real as potentially more interesting opportunities arose; why persevere with the research when there was a sunflower competition to judge, an invitation to knit for Ukraine and a chance to share a mutual love of craft beers? However, avoiding these temptations paid off, when we started to hear from a small number of participants willing to take part in the study.

Revised Approach: Part 2

Five weeks into the study, despondency around the low participant numbers started to set in, added to this was a sense of mounting panic that the trial period deadline was looming. Follow-up calls from the Facebook messenger groups were mixed. Leads that originally seemed fruitful had varied results, from outright denial to silent rejection. We got a glimpse into the working life of a telesales cold caller and if we had ever been tempted to change our careers, we became convinced that sales would never be our forte.

It was time to hit the streets, armed with a new flyer, a sturdy pair of shoes, a flask of tea, and a warm coat we ventured into territories that we had never set foot in before, despite having lived in the city for almost ten years. The new flyer was friendly in tone, and we described the green food-waste bin as a friend or foe, stressing, "*Love them or hate them, those little green food waste bins have got us all talking! If you are one of the many households in the trial area that did or didn't use your green food waste bin, we would love to hear your thoughts. There is no judgement – we are just interested in hearing from you and your thoughts will help us to understand how to make a better food waste service*". We highlighted that those able to participant in the study would receive a £30 voucher for their time and input. Our plan was a leaflet drop and return to ring doorbells a week or so later. We received some interest from the latest mail drop, and we decided to knock, or in the case of the various blocks of flats to ring telecom buzzers to follow up on our recruitment flyer. Video doorbells were absent and any efforts to style our hair would have made no difference. We discovered that buzzing on flat intercoms on a Saturday morning yields little response. Just after 10.00am, on a Wednesday morning, the first author rang the first doorbell on a block of flats that comprised of 40+ residencies.

“BUZZZZZZZZZ”

“Hello, can I help you?” she says.

“Hi, I’m Scott and I’m with my colleague Pallavi and we are researching food waste and your use of the little food waste bin. You should have received our information sheets about our food waste…” I’m cut off mid-sentence.

Photo: Flat telecom and door buzzers

“I’ll stop you there… I’m about to walk the dog (barking in the background). Can you call back another day? Maybe next week?”

We arrange an interview date, and the first author is asked if he is scared of dogs! Next, we try flat 21.

“BUZZZZZZZZZ”

“Hiya, I’m not in. Well, I am, but I’m about to go to the shops,” he says.

“Oh… it won’t take long. My name is Scott and I’m with my colleague Pallavi and we are researching food waste and usage of the little food waste bin. You should have received our information sheets about our food waste study, and I was wondering if we can have 30 minutes of your time to ask a few questions?” I say.

“I’ve never used it mate, bye” he says.

This cycle of rejection continued for a few more buzzers and doorbells and the voucher incentive appeared to be making very little difference. We discovered that people don’t always go out, despite telling you that they are in a hurry. In one memorable telecom conversation, the first author had to explain that he couldn’t leave it behind the bins, because he wasn’t the Amazon guy. We changed tactics as we noted that the majority of buzzers were being answered by females and the idea of a male, entering their flat may appear somewhat

intimidating. The second author's telecom manner was a big improvement, kinder and less robotic than the first authors. Nonetheless, she was not immune from rebuffs, and as she rang buzzers, she was informed from one occupier, "*I can't do it today, I'm still in bed love*". One informant was happy to be interviewed exclusively through their upper kitchen window. One neighbour watched our door buzzing adventures and greeted us warmly in the communal corridor of the flats, mentioning they might be free for an interview. Several moments later, knocking on their door, we were greeted to the loud hum of their vacuum cleaner in action, until we eventually took the hint and departed.

It was difficult to gain trust and acceptance. Arms were never thrown wide open to us; however, we were eventually greeted with folded arms and some understandable reservations. Nonetheless, in one day alone, we were invited into six different flats, conducting successive interviews. Women in these neighbourhoods are so important – they intimately know their neighbours, they are invested in the community because it matters to them, and their families. They tacitly knew who would be 'okay' with being interviewed. Snowballing was used and we were recommended to visit flats 12, 17 and 32 as they were using the waste bin and might be keen to talk to us. We approached with care and sensitivity and most flats welcomed the opportunity to discuss their food habits and waste bin use. We were occasional reminded that we were interrupting, *This Morning* or *Bargain Hunt* on TV, nevertheless, we experienced warm hospitality and a devoted dedication to the interview. We were invited into kitchens to see the food waste bin in action and enjoyed copious cups of tea and the odd custard cream as we went about our interviews. Our most frequent participant was the door buzzer itself, and a couple of interviews were conducted through the intercom system.

It felt a privilege to be able to enter participants' lived environments and listen to them sharing their lived experiences. Participants' stories of austerity and hardship was

crushing for us to hear, and our ability to display a level of humanness and show empathy for their situations fostered trust and enabled discussion to flow. Participants often shared personal histories and discussion orientated towards their values and other aspects of their lives. Motherhood has real value for many of the women we interviewed, and the exceptional pride they had for the daughters and sons was striking. Although many of the participants may never leave these estates, their children often had. The men valued their ability to support their family, being resourceful, thrifty, and being respected in the neighbourhood. We listened to stories about how they had helped their nearest neighbours to use the food waste bin, and this was a source of pride.

Revised Approach: Part 3

Through the various strategies that we were deploying, we were now recruiting more participants in these socially and economically deprived regions and we wanted a final recruitment push before the food trial finished and the waste bins were returned to the council. In one of the districts, we decided to enlist the help of the Imam and we visited the local Mosque.

Unable to enter the Mosque, the second author had to wait in the car park whilst the first author entered a Mosque for the first time. It was lovely and the first author received advice on where to put his shoes and was given a tour of the Mosque. Several classes were occurring, and some children were learning a verse of the Qur'an. It was impressive to see, and the Imam talked at length about Islam and local community projects. He was very enthusiastic and charming. We humbly sought his feedback on the recruitment materials and aspects of the study itself and the Imam invited the first author to return and give a talk after Friday prayer about the food waste scheme. We accepted his kind invitation and gaining the

Imam's support was crucial for spreading the news of the study and for fostering trust and enthusiasm with the community. The first author gave what he thought was a rousing speech on the food waste bins, dropping in anecdotes and a funny story about disposing of smelly eggshells in the little green caddies. He felt liberated giving his PowerPoint free talk. His 10.00am Tuesday lecture crowd would have been enraged – no presentation to download! He waited anxiously for responses, alas, no one came forward to participate in the study or even take the leaflet. Our strategy of using a community hub and religious centre yielded mixed results and difficulties persisted in breaking down barriers between 'us' and 'them'.

Finally, we solicited advice from our interviewees on our recruitment strategies and ways to engage with more participants. The food waste bin was collected from the kerbside on a weekly basis and neighbours chatted with one another allowing participants to demonstrate inside knowledge on their neighbours' use of the green caddy. Therefore, they were able to direct us on who to interview next. Spending time in these communities and understanding contextual factors such as cultural, religious, and historical beliefs were important for developing trust and knowledge in the recruitment of these marginalised consumers.

Final Note

Authors often construct an overall impression that for example, data collection sources, and accessing participant samples is a relatively straight-forward experience[8]. Firstly, a lack of discussion in research methodologies on recruitment challenges is apparent. It may simply be the case that recruitment of sample populations is not necessarily problematic. However, we note that an under recruitment of marginalised participants appears as a perennial limitation in research articles. Secondly, recruitment and sampling are often considered to be part of the

procedural background to a study[9]. Thus, research findings and theoretical contributions are prioritised over research methodologies. Contributions in the latter are sparser.

In this essay we have been transparent about our shortcomings and demonstrate the need for a fluid recruitment strategy to try and overcome some of the challenges that we have presented. Readers will note, our repeated calls for participants did not necessarily go to plan, and the unexpectedness of this resulted in feelings of stress, inadequacy, and we had to confront failure – stirring feelings of researcher vulnerability[10]. This messiness is often concealed in research methodologies. We discovered that the recruitment of socially and economically deprived participants was difficult, and the refusal rate was high. There are several ways to try and understand this, and the topic itself may be a reason why our various appeals for participants was met with a deafening silence. Irrespective of the cost-of-living crisis, households were struggling to put a meal on the table for their family and this has been a long-standing concern for many of our participants in the social and economically deprived trial areas, only to be further exacerbated by austerity measures. Discussing food waste, or the lack thereof given that these consumers are carefully monitoring their meal preparations, and prudent portioning controls are being exercised, means that food waste is not necessarily a pressing issue for them. Second, the practice of not engaging with the food waste bin was apparent and this seemed to be surrounded by some social shame and stigma. Despite our best-efforts, would-be participants were reluctant to engage with us and discuss their non-use of the food waste bin.

Over representation of middle-class consumers could have occurred without frequent efforts to revise our recruitment approaches. We were determined to capture a representative sample of middle-class and working-class consumers and we aimed for a representative sample of males and females and ethnicity representations. We had strong interest from middle-class consumers, both females and males. While females, and males, local British

born residents and ethnic minorities were often reluctant or difficult to reach in the social-economically tier regions, without persistent efforts and collaboration, their voices could have otherwise remained silent. We were conscious of wanting to avoid a representation that middle-class consumers are the principal voices in society.

The recruitment process was both time consuming and personally challenging. Finding the time and feeling safe to visit these socially and economically deprived areas was a delicate balance. Visiting some blocks of flats and houses was a daunting experience and took us to unfamiliar districts of the city, and into areas with social unrest, illicit behaviour, and high crime rates. However, those that lived in these communities considered it a safe place, and unlike us, they were connected and known. If anything, they were disconnected from other areas of the city. The tacit knowledge we had about these areas heightened feelings of anxiety[11] and our own self-awareness of being obvious outsiders. Time pressures were experienced too, and a leaflet drop can take hours, days, and the interaction with individuals as we went about this and being visible in these communities was crucial. Consulting with marginalised individuals in their communities and incorporating their feedback into recruitment helps make the research process accessible and valuable to them.

Personal challenges from the research team were encountered too at each stage of our various revised approaches. In trying to understand our participants' lived reality we encountered a mixture of emotions, including our own embarrassments, and vulnerabilities[12]. For example, the first author experienced researcher guilt. Returning to an estate, similar to one that he grew up on in the North of England made him reflective. He wondered how different his life might now be if he had stayed put. There wasn't a joyous feeling of, "boy done good". Actually, it deepened what he knows about stigmatisation, and the devaluing practices of working-class people. The second author was also given cause to reflect. Going into ethnic minority communities and establishing relationships with female participants of

similar appearance and language provided a contrast with her markedly different middle-class lifestyle.

We have drawn attention to some of the real obstacles that can occur in the recruitment process yet often these remain concealed in research articles. We hope this essay does not detract academics and early career researchers from recruiting and researching marginalised communities. Instead, our goal is that this essay casts light on the frequently overlooked challenges of accessing marginalised communities and provokes healthy discussion. Finally, this essay may act as a reassessment call to support and train candidates and researchers to access samples of hard-to-reach communities and encourage co-operative research practices with participants.

Notes

[1] Üstüner and Holt, Dominated Consumer Acculturation
[2] Hill and Stamey, Homeless in America
[3] Jafari et al., Exploring Researcher Vulnerability
[4] Varman, Sreekumar and Belk, Money, Sacrificial Work, and Poor Consumers
[5] https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7484/CBP-7484.pdf
[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/class-privilege-remains-entrenched-as-social-mobility-stagnates#:~:text=The%20Social%20Mobility%20Commission's%20State,out%20key%20findings%20and%20recommendations.
[7] https://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s52832/10%20APPENDIX%201%20Sheffield_interim_evidence%20base_eds_committee_v2_0.pdf
[8] Mamali, Researcher's guilt
[9] Kristensen and Ravn, voices heard and voices silenced
[10] Steadman, Remembering and anticipating researcher vulnerability
[11] Jafari et al., Exploring Researcher Vulnerability
[12] Downey et al., Researcher Vulnerability

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