

# Chapter 5

## Recruiting Participants: A Socratic Dialogue on the Ethics and Challenges of Encountering Research Participants



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**Abstract** In this chapter, we stage a Socratic Dialogue about a taken-for-granted and undervalued empirical research process: participant recruitment. Being enveloped in different spaces, communities, and research contexts, we reflect upon ethical dilemmas which emerge out of recruitment processes. We offer examples from our research practice and consider our experience of overcoming our own anxieties around researching in distinct communities. In the chapter, Todd discusses his experience of ‘recruitment’ through collaboration *with* participants and organisations which support them. By reflecting on his research with(in) young trans communities and the feminist and participatory ethos which guides this process, Todd explores participant engagement in a context wherein trust, long-term collaboration, trans allyship and social justice and the provision of ‘safe spaces’ are necessary recruitment and research components. In contrast, Doppelhofer explores his experience of conducting research in open, public spaces wherein *ad hoc* participant recruitment takes place in an intrinsically international tourism and heritage context. He examines the difficulties of approaching potential tourist participants, gaining access to heritage stakeholders and policy makers, and overcoming cultural barriers.

By reflecting on our experiences of recruitment, we consider our positionalities in the research site and beyond — Todd as a queer, cisgender scholar in trans spaces, and Doppelhofer as an enthusiast and follower of the same cultural phenomenon he researches. We elucidate what participant recruitment means in different contexts and what ethical, practical, and theoretical issues one might encounter, considerations that must be made when implementing particular recruitment strategies. In doing so, we generate knowledges out of our respective relative failures and successes recruiting.

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## 5.1 Introducing Participant Recruitment and the Socratic Dialogue

Participant recruitment, which we understand as a set of strategies designed to reach, engage, and ensure the consent of research subjects, constitutes the basis of every ethnographic and qualitative research project engaging those other than the researcher. Participants — or informants, co-producers of knowledge, research subjects, or other myriad forms of ‘the engaged in research’ (as opposed to researchers as ‘engager(s)’) — are recruited through strategies and means which vary according to the researchers’ methods and methodologies, epistemological approaches, and desired level of participant reciprocity and co-design. The *diversity* and *impact* of such strategies, however, is rarely acknowledged or reflexively interrogated within geographical or qualitative research literature outside of feminist interrogations of research processes and methods (see Campbell et al. 2014). Indeed, as most handbooks, guides, and research articles only superficially engage with recruitment processes, there is little guidance available in the human geography or social science canon (Hawkins 2016). Existing literatures that touch on participant recruitment might, for example, elaborate solely on their (often surface-layer) identification of potential participants and stakeholders and their characteristics, and the researchers’ choice of method(s) for recruitment (Dunn 2016; Hennink et al. 2020). Such literatures have glossed over, or even ignored, crucial moments where participants are approached and encountered and have not recognised recruitment as constant processes that must be continually and reflexively examined and re-formed by researchers. As such, academic work that focuses on recruitment mainly explores participant representativeness and research quality (see Alto et al. 2018; Czepkiewicz et al. 2017), or advocates for a plurality or innovation of recruitment strategies (see McCormack 2014). As a result, the impacts of the researchers’ situatedness, positionalities, intersectional identities over their interaction with the *recruitment* of participants, and indeed the selection of research spaces and the maximising of participant empowerment are largely under-examined in academic texts. This failing is often to the discontent of doctoral researchers and others who are left to muddle through with their knowledge of the ethics, potential procedures, and challenges of participant recruitment assumed as full. Doctoral researchers, we argue, are rarely required to undertake sustained critical reflection on their recruitment approaches and methodologies.

Taking note of these absences and failings, we present a reflective and reflexive Socratic Dialogue (SD) which builds connections between our distinct research approaches, knowledges, and strategies for recruiting and working with potential

participants. Named after the Greek philosopher Socrates and his method of *Maieutic* ('midwifery'), his eponymous dialogues, rather than teaching one particular truth, aim to stimulate the ability to bring forth knowledge through one's own reason and thought and to advance one's own latent ideas into consciousness through dialogic exchange (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 150b–d). The dialogue we present here deviates from classical SDs, in which Socrates heckles his interlocutors and plays devil's advocate. Instead, we follow the neo-Socratic tradition of German philosophers Nelson (1922/1949) and Heckmann (1981) who conceptualised SDs as offering 'attempt[s] to come to a common answer through systematic deliberation about a fundamental question' and a 'systematic reflection upon experience' (Kessels et al. 2009: 36; Turnball and Mullins 2007). Through a 'conversational' approach, also adopted in more recent texts exploring research methods in human geography (e.g. Gorman-Murray et al. 2010), we build common consensus and knowledge through joint reflection.

In the following section, we elaborate on our research contexts and practices to illustrate the distinctions between our participant recruitment approaches and the reasoning behind our recruitment choices. Our dialogue does not follow a rigid structure or flow; instead, we present here an unfolding thinking-through of key issues and nascent points of interest. We hope, in turn, that our dialogue sparks conversations amongst readers around the ethics and challenges of participant recruitment.

## 5.2 Dialogue Exploring Our Experiences of Participant Recruitment

### 5.2.1 *Introducing Our Research*

**James (J):** Christoph, I would like to hear more about where your research takes place.

**Christoph (C):** I am researching how heritage landscapes are re-imagined through imaginary worlds created in popular culture. To do so, I explore the filming locations of the HBO fantasy series *Game of Thrones (GOT)*. Newly emerging on-site performances, tourist offers, destination marketing, and the sharing of these experiences on social media, create new diegetic spaces that reshape those previously existing heritage landscapes for both *GOT* fans and other stakeholders. These individuals include local populations and those uninitiated, who might be unfamiliar with the narratives of the series yet still emulate and reproduce its iconography through tourist performance (see Urry and Larson 2011; Roesch 2009). My fieldwork took me across various public heritage sites in Northern Ireland, Croatia, and Spain where I observed and interviewed different stakeholders to find out how this media-induced phenomenon alters the perception

and identity of heritage landscapes and the role they play as public stages for living out fantasies.

**J:** I can imagine there would be a diverse set of people.

**C:** Absolutely. I encountered a wide variety of participants, necessitating a range of recruitment strategies. Participant recruitment was therefore not only an essential process for obtaining research data but also an *ongoing struggle* as I grappled with various participants' cultural backgrounds, stakeholders, and settings. For some participants, such as policy makers and heritage and tourism authorities, recruitment was a multi-step process with weeks and months of planning ahead, whilst for most others, it was conducted in a matter of seconds, depending on my ability to catch them in the 'right moment' while they were visiting filming locations. James, who were your participants and in what contexts did you engage with them?

**J:** My research primarily took place in spaces designed for young trans people's safety and wellbeing. Consequently, I worked with participants in settings wherein they were mostly already emotionally embedded. In these sites, I engaged in participatory action research (PAR)-informed methodologies — approaches that attempt to deconstruct power relations by both empowering participants as co-creators of knowledge and developing an action-focused agenda. Approaching the research through a participatory focus allowed me to follow an ethos of collaboration at every stage from design to dissemination (Pain and Francis 2003). In my research, this involved undertaking creative and collaborative workshops and in depth, one-to-one oral history, and creative interviews with young trans people aged 14–25. Similarly to your research, then, the spatial contexts in which I worked were *exceptional*, not simply through their unique social and cultural connotations and potential for affirmation and friendship, but in their offering of a space of relative safety and respite from societal hostility. An important dynamic to mention early on in our dialogue is that from a traditional perspective interrogating 'insider-outsider' relation, I might be seen as an 'outsider', as I am not trans and was therefore often the only cisgender (cis) person present in the research space. Additionally, I also played a key role in crafting and maintaining the research sites, which had to be maintained primarily as 'safe spaces' — sites that are cultivated as spaces and times to develop communities for restoration, resilience, and resistance away from hostility and oppression (see The Roestone Collective 2014) — for young trans people. My participant recruitment processes, as a result, had to reflect on and respond to these dynamics. I think it would be fair to say, Christoph, that we both explore how our participants experience their lived worlds, but with differing emotional and political stakes in our research sites.

### 5.2.2 *Differential Research Agendas and Practices*

- C:** Both of our research *agendas* present very different ethical dilemmas that need to be confronted throughout our research *practices*. Let us begin by thinking through what each of our participant recruitment strategies and practices looked like.
- J:** I will start by saying that recruitment was a very long process for me, not least because of myriad ethical dilemmas. I spent a lot of time considering the everyday lives of trans people by engaging with academic literature and exploring young trans people's creative work and writings whilst designing the project. Ultimately, I decided that to ensure that the participatory ethos of working *with* young trans people was maintained at the core of my research praxis, it was necessary to collaborate with, and embed myself with(in), an organisation directly engaging with trans people. Regular dialogue ensured that I was putting my participants' needs and concerns (and those of wider trans communities) at the forefront of my work. I could seek input from trans facilitators and people with a stake in young trans people's lives and tailor my research practices to fit the policies and practices of the organisation.
- C:** I imagine that establishing contact and researching the everyday experience of young trans people as a cis researcher must have been complex. How did you go about building trust to enter these very sensitive spaces?
- J:** I established a close working relationship with Gendered Intelligence, a national community interest group supporting young trans people in the UK (see Stewart 2018). I held many conversations with the organisation's leaders and youth workers about the purpose of my research and what had brought me to it, what the research might look like and involve, the spaces it might create, and where the voices, stories, and creative work of my participants might travel. I was also interested in emphasising my hopes that the research and its practices and spaces would benefit both young people attending research sessions and the organisation alongside trans policy in the UK more broadly. Although these were difficult issues to think through well ahead of the empirical research stage, collaboration enabled me to think through my own positionalities and situatedness, ethical concerns related to collaborating with young trans people (particularly those under 18), and the research methodologies along more practical lines. I was able to interrogate my shifting positionalities in trans spaces and the driving forces of my research praxis. In the end, the collaborations I developed enabled me to work in trans and queer spaces in urban centres in London and Scotland. What was the initial idea behind your rationale and approach towards recruitment, and thinking about recruitment for the first time?
- C:** As my research involved several different locations and recruiting 'on the spot', it was largely impossible for me to engage with a single gatekeeper, unlike your research, James, where a central gatekeeping organisation was an ethical and administrative necessity. With my background in archaeology and cultural heritage management, I had limited experience in participatory methods, so

recruitment was perhaps the most stressful and anxiety-inducing aspect of my research. Given that this was the first time I conducted ethnographic research, I became so focused on the technicalities and formalities of interviewing, observation and proper ethical conduct that, aside from the key stakeholders who I could identify and approach before going into the field, I had very limited strategies in place for recruitment itself. For me, thinking about the on-site recruitment was — quite reminiscent of the literature — underrepresented in my preparation. In fact, I had to come up with it in the field!

### 5.2.3 *Participant Recruitment Anxieties and Challenges*

**J:** Were there any particular strategies you employed to recruit your participants in the field?

**C:** I would separate my recruitment practices and experiences into two distinct categories. The first involved approaching day visitors to sites on an *ad hoc* basis, whilst the second involved recruiting policy makers and stakeholders within the heritage and tourism sector. Although, I could often pre-arrange the latter, both sets of recruitment brought their own challenges and frustrations.

For the on-site interviews with tourists, I had adopted no plan other than what most of the literature suggested: Go ‘in the field’ and ‘find people who know the answers and can give you the answers’, as it was sarcastically summarised by Phillips and Johns (2012: 143), who subsequently glossed over the recruitment process too. Having only limited understanding of what recruitment might look and feel like in situ, this was not as easy a process, as most literature would make it seem. To put it in a way thematically fitting our dialogue: I felt like an ill-prepared Socrates, entering a public forum, harassing people who I (and definitely some of them) thought had better things to do than talking with a PhD student during their well-deserved holiday! My initial recruitment strategies ranged from bluntly — and indeed clumsily — approaching visitors with a generic opener along the lines of ‘would you have a few minutes?’, to targeting specifically those who appeared to linger at the site rather than to be on the move. I must have looked quite menacing at times, running towards them with my field-work gear. In what felt like a desperate attempt to pique potential participants’ interests, I even started to offer biscuits and information about the site they were visiting. At least the latter approach felt more natural and comfortable due to my past and present work experience as tour and museum guide.

What was hardest to overcome was a constant, lingering feeling that, depending on the day, would range from feeling social awkwardness to experiencing anxiety when trying to initiate contact with potential participants. Some days, I could not bring myself to approach anybody — even though I had managed to do so just the day before. Just the thought of walking up to a stranger would cause discomfort to me. Often, I think, there was a direct correlation with my previous success rate. For example, once somebody had shown disinterest or had behaved

dismissively when I approached them for an interview, I felt that I was pestering people with my research, rather than seeing it as a knowledge-sharing and knowledge-making opportunity. It took some time to overcome this and, in all honesty, even when I started to have better strategies in place and felt more comfortable in my role as a researcher, my previously described discomfort stayed with me.

**J:** Likewise, I faced many challenges whilst recruiting participants, whether ethical, emotional, anxious, or otherwise. Recruitment, as it should be, was an *ongoing process* that I had to continually return to and negotiate between myself, the diversity of participants and their needs, field sites, gatekeepers, and other actors implicated in the process. My own anxieties and anxious orientations to research and research spaces, contributed to the messy complexity of this process (see Todd 2020). I know that such mental health concerns all too common amongst early career researchers like us.

One of the most difficult-to-overcome anxieties I faced was related to the necessity of doing justice to the communities and spaces I was researching in. I wanted to ensure that my recruitment not only allowed me to raise the voices and stories of young trans people, but that a diversity of trans youth voices were represented in the research. I overcame this by recognising that research can never be fully representative, particularly when limited by the confines of funding and time constraints. However, I situated myself in a diversity of trans spaces and focused some of my recruitment strategies on working with or recruiting particularly marginalised or underrepresented young trans folks (including trans women, non-binary people, and people of colour), and advertised the research both personally and via my partner organisation through multiple and intersecting platforms including social media, flyers, verbal communication, and email advertisement.

**C:** It seems that part of this anxiety you are describing comes from dealing with a multitude of (self-imposed) responsibilities involving your research while also being expected not to fail at any of them. Do you think that the expectations of producing ‘positive results’ and being coerced into presenting yourself as a successful researcher contributed to this pressure and anxiety around recruitment?

**J:** I think it added to it. One thing we do not hear enough about in academic research is a discussion around failures, mistakes, and changed directions. As Harrowell et al. (2018: 236) tell us, ‘there remains a need to acknowledge openly that failure is in fact an everyday, and indeed powerfully productive element of geographic field work’. This is particularly the case, I argue, in the neoliberal, emotionally demanding academic context which asks us to project the image of a linear, always-already successful research process, even when working around emotional labour intensive or distressing research experiences, or whilst still training in social research praxis as early career researchers.

I experienced anxiety and pressure to succeed with particular intensity when hearing my participants’ most difficult stories and narratives. I knew that doing justice to a diversity of voices was one of the cornerstones of how I saw my research, but this commitment also constituted an emotionally demanding inter-



nal pressure and embodied tension. Being a cis researcher entering trans spaces, I had to remember that my presence was subject to gatekeepers' and my participants' comfort, and my priority was to ensure the safety and wellbeing of trans folk entering and accessing those spaces. This was less of a concern for one-to-one work or workshops set up outside of already existing spaces and times for the young trans community. In these sites, I knew that everyone was present there because they wished to take part in the research for catharsis, enjoyment, or to contribute to furthering knowledge around trans experiences (although I still maintained spaces and mechanisms for participant rest and withdrawal, also facilitated by collaborators).

I am keen to hear how you coped with and overcame rejection in your participant recruitment, given that your strategies could rarely be planned in advance. How did the strategies you developed for this potential rejection vary according to your interactions with different stakeholders in the field?

**C:** My anxiety around rejection was less prevalent when contacting identifiable gatekeepers and experts whom I could email in advance, or with local business owners and tour guides who I knew are used to being approached and talked to by strangers. The literature prepares you for some rejections or a lack of responses (Crang and Cook 2007); however, nothing could prepare me for my biggest period of anxiety: the lead-up to my fieldwork in Dubrovnik, one of my main research sites. While I thought I had everything under control after a smooth first 'campaign' in Northern Ireland where I had many positive responses to my interview requests, nothing seemed to work when I employed the same strategy in Croatia. Nobody I had emailed beforehand — often months in advance and multiple times — returned any of my requests, or they claimed they had no information for me. As the days drew closer to my departure, the pressure was suffocating; I feared that my entire PhD was falling apart in front of my eyes! In hindsight, this turned out to be an unwarranted fear, as I developed more contacts and collected more data than I wished for once in the field.

**J:** What happened in the field site to make this success the case?

**C:** Once I arrived and familiarised myself with Dubrovnik, many things fell into place. I think this is an important advice for anybody who struggles with participant recruitment in international, unfamiliar contexts: the power of being in the place, talking face-to-face with people, and getting to know the location, its customs and etiquette cannot be underestimated. Fieldwork is — and here I must wholeheartedly agree with the literature — messy (Harrowell et al. 2018; Marshall and Rossman 1989: 21). Often you must find a single person — it may be a tour guide, a shop- or innkeeper, or even a random local site visitor — to start a snowballing process. This learning through 'being in a place' also helped greatly in my recruiting of day visitors, and I became more comfortable to approach strangers. It is important to keep in mind that while one must prepare as much as possible in advance, certain aspects of fieldwork, like the ones described, will only unfold once you are doing them. Also, I think my experience of failure and adaptation illustrates that there is not, and cannot ever be, a one-size-fits-all approach to recruitment. While the same email templates and intro-



ductions led almost always to immediate success in Northern Ireland, this did not apply to the context of Croatia. Research requires a constant updating and reviewing of your recruitment strategies.

#### 5.2.4 Positionalities

**C:** James, you already indicated the importance of your positionality. I want to hear more about how your identities and ‘insider-outsider-ness’, as you might term it, interacted with your participant recruitment?

**J:** Again, I was quite anxious that, in certain research settings, I was entering spaces crafted by and for trans people that should not be controlled by my research agendas as a cis researcher. As a result, I made sure that each time I sought the permission of young trans people to be present there through differing techniques. I volunteered and went along to young trans community spaces and events to introduce myself to their dynamics and practices and to familiarise myself with potential participants. First and foremost, I made sure to introduce myself and the research in easy-to-understand language, leaving plenty of space and time for questions and concerns, whilst in all group settings the young people could also approach trans youth workers or facilitators to voice any thoughts or potential discomfort. I made sure that my voice was never prioritised in any research setting, and a separate quiet space was always available. When working in an already-existing space (such as regularly occurring community events) my workshop took place in a secondary room, to give potential participants and others present the choice to ignore my work entirely or come and go from the research activities as they saw fit. In group settings, I always made sure to stage a conversation or activity around what a cis researcher entering their space meant and felt like for potential participants. These mechanisms formed part of my recruitment process, given that participants *continually consented* to taking part and could withdraw that consent at any time.

However, in terms of my positionalities and multiple identities and subject positions, it is not simply enough to think through my position or ‘outsiderness’ as a cis researcher, or my relative ‘insiderness’ as a queer person myself, or someone sharing a similar age to participants. Indeed, there are many ways that researchers can relate to or interact with potential participants, some of which we can never be fully aware of, or even hope to fully interrogate. Indeed, despite the potential for understandable research fatigue, discomfort, or lack of trust around cis researchers in trans spaces or communities (see e.g. Pearce 2018; Vincent 2018), participants frequently told me that they appreciated the solidarity I displayed, my knowledge of trans issues and affirming languages, the care in which I treated them and their stories and spaces, and my attentiveness to their needs and concerns. By being up front about the fact that the research was iterative and partially designed with their stories at the forefront of my research practice and methodology when recruiting, I hope that I allowed participants to feel assured

that they were part of the decision-making process. Again, I also shared my own queer stories which participants occasionally drew on to develop their own storytelling. In many ways, my position should be looked upon and informed by this additional layer of understanding and solidarity I attempted to constantly embody. Without this commitment to my participants and to trans allyship, I could not have felt comfortable engaging in participant recruitment at all. With participants' needs at the core of everything I did during the research, I was able to recruit and work with young trans people in a way that felt authentic and less intrusive or imposing. However, the extent of my awareness of these dynamics and participants' feelings about my presence and the research generally were always incomplete.

**C:** Being aware of and making use of my positionality was also *helpful* in my recruitment process. One of the strategies I employed to overcome my previously described anxieties and aversions of approaching potential informants, was directly connected to my research subject and my positionality within — I too am a *GOT* fan! I remember a case where some tourists happened to arrive at a filming location at the same time as a costumed *GOT*-tour group which allowed them to join to pose with props and re-enact scenes. The excitement, surprise, and joy they displayed when offered this opportunity was contagious — especially for somebody like me who had participated in one of those tours in the days before. We began casual conversations while participating in this spectacle, naming favourite scenes and characters from *GOT* and speculating about the upcoming last season of the show. This shared experience, which had unconsciously advanced our reciprocity, facilitated the perfect space for an interview. There was a real connection through our shared fandom and a sense of community. Our shared view on the world, much like the queer perspective you described with your participants, became intrinsic to the recruitment process and the research beyond.

In later research and recruitment encounters, I began using this shared knowledge and experiences of the heritage sites as an *entry point* to dialogue with participants. Through this (real or imagined) shared sense of connection, I was able to overcome my apprehension and sense of 'invading' their private space. Identifying myself with, or at least becoming aware of, the motivations of my interviewees helped me to facilitate a better space through which to elicit far more in-depth stories and information. Of course, this also impacted my sampling. I would say that there was a certain 'type' of participant I felt most comfortable around, namely those I could name and identify as *GOT* fans through their clear and obvious performances and comments. Indeed, I would mainly catch the most vocal performers at the site, while those who do not engage in a certain way remained excluded from my comfort zone. I constantly had to remind myself to approach as many different people to catch the necessary nuances and diversity in engaging with the sites. Did you have any similar experiences?

**J:** I found it helpful to remind myself that my queerness, political commitment to trans allyship, social justice, and queer solidarity figured in my *queering* of

participant recruitment<sup>1</sup> (see Browne and Nash 2010; Gorman-Murray et al. 2010). As Waitt (writing as part of Gorman-Murray et al. 2010: 103) notes, ‘recruitment for queer projects often relies upon essentialised identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, [and] transgender [...] [with] implications for what is then concealed and disclosed’ by participants in research encounters. It felt both obvious and important for participants to describe themselves on their own terms (whether their identities, names, and pronouns were stable or otherwise) and to recognise the expansiveness of gender diversity. I encourage other researchers to build similar practices of affirmation and recognition into their recruitment and research (see Vincent 2018 on developing ethical and empowering research with trans people). For me, queering research and recruitment meant building relationships of solidarity and developing platforms to empower young trans people to work at their own pace to share their voices and tell their own stories. Queering the research also meant recruiting by informing potential participants that the research would be conducted according to their terms and choices and, again, making a commitment to sharing my own queer stories and histories with participants and knowing when to step back and relinquish control of conversations so that trans voices took priority over my own. When recruiting, participants were encouraged to bring along objects to share their stories through. I often found that the best moments shared in research encounters happened when I told my own stories, or when my participants and I had shared similar experiences as queer folk (e.g. coming out, feeling constrained in certain spaces, crafting queer spaces, and reconciling our queerness in our youth), or indeed as young people, or students, avid readers, fans of music, or through other moments of shared understanding that became crucial in establishing layers of mutual understanding and nuanced conversation. Embodying a queer approach to my research and recruitment, in these ways and more, was a major part of overcoming my anxiety.

**C:** Too often I feel that participants are seen as a means to an end, as numbers, or as vehicles for ‘data’, which leads to alienation, and builds a barrier between researcher and participant. In my research, I often felt the relationship was one-sided, in the sense that I both depended on the goodwill of other people and continually questioned why participants would even be interested in contributing to my research. Participant recruitment involves employing and enlisting people for our own personal gains. They give us time, data, and personal details. Do they gain anything out of it? If so, what? If not, why should they bother? As your approach illustrates, it is helpful throughout the recruitment process to think about how to ‘give back’ to participants and develop reciprocity. When I reflect on my experiences, some of the most successful and insightful interviews I had were those where we discussed our shared fandom or those whom I could provide with more information on filming locations, travel tips, and local recommendations. Some of my interviewees expressed interest in my research and

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<sup>1</sup>Following Browne and Nash (2010: 9), I avoid defining queer and queering here, preferring they be left open as terms that ‘can and should be redeployed, fucked with and used in resistant and transgressive ways’.

asked for copies of any work coming from their data, showing a sense of personal pride to be part of a research project. This illustrates that sharing our co-created knowledge might in some contexts be both an adequate way of giving back and a means to bolster recruitment strategies.

### **5.2.5 *Participant Consent and Forming Relationships with Participants***

**C:** This leads me to something that I thought of numerous times — and I am certain for you it must be an even larger concern: consent. While I gave my ‘recruits’ an overview of what they are enlisting to, they have very little choice and agency over what happens afterwards and how I use their data. Tourists, who had only a few moments to decide if they wanted to participate in my study, were not able to consider and reflect in what way I might use their words. I always provided them with contact details in case they would reconsider.

Most of my encounters did not necessarily deal with any sensitive data and I took little personal information from participants. However, there were participants — mainly those having economic and professional stakes — for whom publishing certain quotes under their names or organisations would not be in their best interest, even though they had given consent initially. These participants included public relations officials and guides who talked about licensing issues surrounding copyrighted materials used in promoting and conducting tours. While important for understanding the subject of my research, I am aware that obtaining consent is not necessarily a free pass. Where the identity of said organisations and persons might have had negative effects, I had to make decisions on issues that needed to be confronted. Given that you dealt with a perhaps more sensitive topic and the need to be responsive to your participants, I am curious about how you navigated various ethical questions and dilemmas.

**J:** One of my key concerns was indeed around participant consent. I knew that my research was ethically complex, particularly because some of my participants were under 18, and it was not ethically appropriate to seek their parents’ consent regarding their participation in order to maintain their safety and wellbeing, with a number of participants being not ‘out’ as trans beyond the spaces of my collaborative partner. Although I was able to obtain institutional ethical approval for this and all aspects of my research by following and adopting research council-recognised principles for the ethical recruitment of minor and by building additional procedures of youth verbal and written consent into my practice, I was still careful to ensure that all young people involved fully understood what it meant to participate in the research. The facilitation of the organisations I collaborated with were key in addressing this, as I became a guest (co-)facilitator in spaces exclusively maintained for and by trans people.

My first research encounter was a creative workshop around the theme of clothing, where participants created ‘body maps’ of their emotional and embodied experiences in relation to items of clothing and (gendered) clothing practices. Because of my status as a guest (co-)facilitator, I was able to articulate to a large group of trans people who I was, why I had entered their space, how I planned to work with them, and my interest in elevating their voices. Again, being present in a space where multiple activities were taking place also allowed me to offer participants a choice of whether to attend my planned creative activity or the other activities that were taking place at the same time. After setting up in the space in this way, I was able to discuss my positionality, and my presence in their space, and the consent procedure with the young people through participatory diagramming and group discussion. This initial experience, part of the recruitment process, strengthened my resolve in maintaining a sensitive, iterative, and responsive participatory research strategy. I was able to take this new ethos and sense of duty to the participants, their wellbeing, and their stories forward into future research encounters and spaces and times of participant recruitment.

**C:** It seems that you were able to create an intimate relationship with participants, given the time you spent thinking about their experiences and their wellbeing. In contrast to your research, the short nature of my research encounters meant that it was not possible to formulate such a personal relationship. This made it more likely, as mentioned previously, that I saw my participants as disembodied ‘numbers’; indeed, at the end of the day, I knew very few of my participants’ names!

On the surface level, I assumed that there was neither time nor a necessity of a longer trust-building process because my research focused on holiday experiences, a limited timeframe in an out-of-the-ordinary setting for both my participants and me. I think this absence of an emotional bond was detrimental to the recruiting and interview process, as this perpetuated my feelings of awkwardness and invasion into their leisure time. However, this turned out to be unfounded in some cases, as I would encounter several of my research participants multiple times — sometimes many miles apart — and got to know them better. On several occasions, I would run into the same tourists whom I interviewed previously. One group of visitors were thrilled to see me a day or two after our interview to show me photos of them re-enacting scenes — something they knew was part of my research. Others thanked me for the good recommendations for attractions and bars I gave them. Some even wanted to take a photo together with me on the ‘Iron Throne’, a prop-replica from the series that was exhibited at one of my research sites. In several instances, after I interviewed them, local guides even became recruiters for the project in a sense. They would introduce me and my research to their tour participants, calling me the ‘*GOT* expert’ and sending them to me to be interviewed. By letting me participate in their tours for free and helping me to establish contact with numerous local authorities, these guides helped me to eliminate some of my previously stated awkwardness and anxiety for recruitment. In return, I was ‘recruited’ by said guides for their purposes. At one point, a guide spotted me at one of my usual fieldwork sites and deployed me as a ‘living prop’ for her guests to re-enact a scene from *GOT* for their Instagram

photos. One time, I was asked to help to shoot a promotional video for one guide's website. I became fully embedded into the spaces I researched and felt I was contributing to the perpetuation and reinforcement of the very phenomenon I was aiming to observe.

**J:** In a way, that is a perfect way to round off our dialogue: being attentive to the ongoing nature of participant recruitment, and the *possibilities* for research encounter that continually examining our participant recruitment practices can generate. Similarly to you, Christoph, as time went on, I also found myself increasingly embedded in the spaces I was researching in by, for example, re-encountering both gatekeepers and participants, playing a role in facilitating research/community spaces, and helping to craft and maintain their 'safe' conditions and uphold their queer and trans dynamics. I also found myself, in some cases, becoming increasingly entangled in my participants' stories and narratives. Though it is difficult for me to articulate what this felt like, I found that building a longer-term relationship with my participants, gatekeepers, and partner organisation over time allowed me to engage in, variously, voice-raising, friendship, solidarity, story-sharing, allyship, activism, and *commitment* — with(in) and to the young trans communities and participants I encountered.

### 5.3 Conclusions: The Ethics, Challenges, and Opportunities of Participant Recruitment

In this chapter, we have discussed our participant recruitment strategies to think through what participant recruitment means in different contexts. The chapter has raised ethical, practical, and theoretical issues one might encounter when implementing a particular set of recruitment strategies. We have problematised 'recruitment' as always-already constituting more than selecting and engaging potential participants, and have reflected on what it means, looks, and feels like to 'recruit participants'. In doing so, we have positioned participant recruitment as an ongoing, iterative process requiring the researcher to interrogate continually and reflexively their self, potential participants, and the field sites and spaces in which they research. Doing so, we argue, is an emotionally demanding labour requiring social science researchers' commitment to recruiting and working with participants through means which align with participants' experiences and desires for engagement. Recruiting participants ethically to do justice to the diversity of voices and experiences we engage with in social research is a difficult, often emotionally fraught undertaking that can never be fully reciprocal or free of power dynamics.

As we have shown, recruiting participants can be anxiety-provoking and, at times, can feel like a hardship wherein a finished research project seems like an all-too-distant future. However, recruitment can also provide some of the most enriching and exciting experiences in research, particularly as a doctoral researcher.

Indeed, recruiting participants through a careful and considered approach can offer us insight into ourselves, our positionalities, how we work, and the spaces in which we become embedded. Crucially, as we have demonstrated, continually interrogating approaches to recruiting participants can offer more nuanced ways of working with those whose stories we set out to elucidate. We aim to encourage readers to build on our narrative by considering how power relations are emergent and potentially deconstructed through recruitment. We hope that this chapter will offer opportunities for early career researchers to both mitigate their anxieties and doubts and reflect on their planned recruitment practices before entering the field. To that end, we encourage readers to continue our conversation by considering the ethics, challenges, and opportunities of participant recruitment throughout their own research practices.

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