



Toolkit #05

Door Knocking as a Method of Recruiting a Sample

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Introduction

As part of the Living Resemblances project I conducted a set of 31 'creative' interviews with people in their homes where I discussed their lived experiences of family resemblances. I recruited this sample through leafleting streets and then knocking on doors to talk to residents. The method was very successful. This toolkit will outline how I went about recruiting the participants for the project and point to some of the potential benefits of the method for other research projects.



Where you see this image you can download supporting documents from our website, from the same web page as this toolkit.

Deciding on door knocking

Before deciding on how you are going to recruit your sample it is worth thinking carefully about whether door knocking is the most appropriate method for your study. It may be that you need to think about access through another method such as a gatekeeper or by snowball sampling instead.

- Door knocking is a particularly appropriate method if you don't need/want a sample of people who belong to a particular community or group. Where there is no bounded area or group of people to whom you want access, or where you are not interested in recruiting people from hard to reach social groups or with very specific experiences, it can be more productive (and appropriate) to contact people directly rather than through a third party.
- Despite this it is still possible to employ a theoretical sampling strategy when recruiting people through door knocking as long as you are not too specific. For example in the Living Resemblances project we were interested in

everyday, mundane experiences of family resemblances so I avoided setting out to recruit people facing particular 'resemblances challenges' such as adoption or twinship (although people with these experiences did crop up in the sample despite us not setting out to look for them). We did however use our knowledge of the subject area to identify three loose 'life stage' categories to target (people in their 20's and 30's with no children, people with children under 18 and grandparents) and to decide upon targeting a sub-sample of people from Caribbean backgrounds.

- It is also worth bearing in mind that the success and enjoyment of the door knocking process relies on you being there to 'sell' your research in person. Although I did not face many rude rejections on doorsteps, you have to be prepared to expose yourself to the potential risk and embarrassment of having a few doors slammed in your face. This is unlikely to be an enjoyable method of recruitment if you are shy!

Choosing your area(s)

Think carefully about where you do your door knocking. We wanted a sample of men and women at different life stages, a range of social class backgrounds and including some Caribbean people.

- I chose areas for door knocking using a combination of local population statistics, local knowledge and visiting potential areas to get a sense of what they were like. Obviously locality cannot be used as a proxy for social class, life stage or ethnicity but you can increase your chances of accessing the people you want by choosing your area carefully.
- You can choose as few or as many areas as you want. I selected two contrasting areas (Finlay Edge because of its predominantly working class population and large Caribbean community and Harnsworth because of its wealthy middle class population and contrast with Finlay Edge) and I feel that I was able to get more out of using door knocking by focusing in on these two areas and becoming very familiar with them.

Selecting streets

- Once you've selected your area(s), have a walk around the streets and familiarise yourself with them. This will help you to choose which streets you want to target.
- There are various things to look out for when choosing streets, keep a note of where you have chosen and why. In the Living Resemblances project my reasons for choosing streets evolved as I became more familiar with the research areas. For example, in Harnsworth I chose streets with large family size houses to boost the number of parents in my sample. In Finlay Edge I tried to choose a variety of streets, some better maintained and with smarter houses than others.
- Bear in mind that even when an area has a mixed population, the streets themselves can remain remarkably homogenous. For example, when door knocking in Finlay Edge I initially selected streets housing very few Caribbean people, despite the area's large Caribbean population. Look out for signs that a street's population may be different from the larger population of that area. For example, it was only when, one particularly sunny day I noticed groups of

Caribbean men sitting in front of their houses enjoying the weather that I found streets with more Caribbean residents.

Leafletting

After selecting my streets I dropped a leaflet and letter through all the letter boxes before returning to knock on doors.

- It is important to design an attractive, colourful leaflet that introduces the project and explains what the interview will entail. I also left a reply slip in my leaflet to enable potential participants to contact me directly, although very few interviews were arranged this way.



Download sample document from the toolkit page of our website:
Recruitment leaflet for Living Resemblances project

- It is also useful to include an accompanying letter explaining that you are recruiting for a research project and that you will be calling back in a few days. Remember to give people the option of requesting that you don't call back (although nobody in my project actually did this).



Download sample document from the toolkit page of our website:
Accompanying letter about project

- If you are door knocking locally it might be useful to include your university logo which, if your research area is close to campus, should be easily recognisable to locals.
- Think about when you will be returning to do your door knocking before you drop off any leaflets. If you are planning to call back at the weekend it's often best to drop your leaflets on a Wednesday so people have had time to look at them. Always try and call back within a week (but over two days) after dropping off your leaflets so that people are more likely to remember the project.
- You also need to think about how many interviews you are able to arrange before you decide how many leaflets to drop. My success rate for securing interviews was around one yes in ten (including houses where there was no answer at the door) and I leafleted and door knocked on between 30 and 80 houses at a time depending on how much time I had for interviewing the following week. It is best to leaflet when you have plenty of time to arrange the subsequent interviews or to start with a small 'pilot' drop in order to get a sense of how many interviews will result from one leaflet drop.
- Don't be put off if lots of people have lost, thrown away or deny all knowledge of having received your leaflet. This happened many times when I was door knocking and had little bearing on whether or not they went on to take part in the research. Having dropped a leaflet lends a legitimacy to approaching people's doors in this way regardless of whether they have read it. Take a large stack of spare leaflets with you so you can talk people through it on the doorstep where necessary.

Door knocking

There are a number of considerations about when to do the subsequent door knocking.

- Think about times of day to call back when people are likely to be at home. Weekday evenings and Saturday afternoons worked best for me but bear in mind that you only have a gap of a few hours between people getting home from work and eating their evening meal on weekday evenings and that some people may not want to be disturbed on a religious day (this will depend on the area you target, for example, avoid door knocking in areas with large Jewish populations on a Saturday).
- I preferred to limit my evening door knocking to the summer months when it was still light. This not only felt safer for me but I think it was also better for residents to be able to clearly see me approach their front door and it encouraged people to linger on their doorsteps and have a chat.

As I stated earlier, I think the main reason why door knocking is a successful recruitment method is that it gives potential participants the opportunity to meet the person who they will be inviting into their home to do the interview. It is a chance for them to see that you are friendly, easy to talk to and enthusiastic about your research. This is what will make them feel enthusiastic about taking part.

- You will probably find that after knocking on a number of doors you develop a 'patter', or set of phrases you always use to introduce yourself. Try and make sure that you always smile and appear fresh and genuine as each door is opened. After running through the same lines many times it is easy to accidentally come across as bored, or worse, as if your speech is a little too well practiced (like some sales people!).
- To my surprise no-one thought I was selling something when I was door knocking but I did worry a lot about this at first. I would advise against dressing in overly smart clothes. I went along in my usual clothes and a simple clipboard and I think this helped to prevent me looking like a salesperson.
- It's a good idea to take a clip board with you and to print out a spreadsheet showing the door numbers you have leafleted and noting down what happened when you called back. This will help to avoid knocking on the door of someone who has already said no.
- Don't despair if everyone seems to be saying no. Sometimes I would be door knocking for an hour without securing a single interview and then book five interviews in the last fifteen minutes. Keep going and try a few streets. In two hours of door knocking you should be arranging 6 or 7 interviews. If not, consider the time of day, location, suitability of the project and your own enjoyment (or otherwise) of the process. Door knocking may not be the best method for you.
- When you do come across someone who wants to participate it's much better to book an interview there and then and for as soon as possible (preferably within a week, two weeks maximum). Don't forget your diary and don't go door knocking just before you go on holiday or have a particularly busy week coming up. After arranging an interview I took down participants' phone numbers and phoned before the interview to remind them about the interview and check it was still convenient. No-one forgot their interview in my study but you might find it useful to fill in some sort of interview card with the date and time of the interview to give participants. Make sure that

participants have a copy of the leaflet and know that they can phone you about the interview if they want to.

Safety

There are some safety considerations with door knocking.

- Always tell someone when you are leafleting and door knocking and make sure they know which streets you are targeting and when you expect to be finished.
- Never go into someone's house for an impromptu interview there and then without informing anyone. Always arrange a time to return so someone will know where you are.
- If using public transport familiarise yourself with bus timetables and local taxi numbers.
- If you feel unsure about an area, take a colleague or friend with you (thanks Hazel, Sean and Stewart!).
- Try and avoid leafleting and door knocking in dark or secluded areas.
- Door knocking can actually provide you with a way of quickly 'vetting' potential participants. If you don't like the feel of a doorstep interaction (for example if the individual is intoxicated or makes inappropriate comments) you can leave a leaflet and walk away without trying to book an interview.

Refining the shape of your sample

One of the most interesting things about door knocking is it is a chance to talk to people who aren't interested in taking part in your study as well as those who are.

Although in the Living Resemblances project door knocking was a successful recruitment strategy, I had initial difficulties recruiting men. It can be notoriously difficult to recruit men for research about 'family things' and I noticed that men were actually answering the door less than women and were quite likely to go and fetch their partners after hearing me explain the project. I therefore designed a new leaflet specifically for men and did some 'men only' door knocks. Once it was clear that it was only men I needed to speak to and that it couldn't be passed onto a female partner or relative, my success levels at recruiting men were the same as those in my general door knocks.



Download sample document from the toolkit page of our website:
Recruitment leaflet for male participants

- It is worth reassessing the shape of your sample at regular intervals during the door knocking process.
- The technique of designing leaflets specifically for an underrepresented group (in my case men) may work for you. However, I faced similar problems with the ethnic mix in my sample and recruited less Caribbean people through door knocking than I had first hoped. Ultimately I boosted the numbers of Caribbean people in my sample through different recruitment methods. It is therefore worth bearing in mind that it might be necessary to employ other

recruitment techniques in conjunction with door knocking to ensure your sample includes the right people.

Enriching your research

Door knocking is an embodied, sensory experience that enables the researcher to experience the locality in which their participants live first-hand.

- Try to pay attention to the sights, sounds and smells you experience when door knocking as well as other things going on around you. Do people chat at bus stops and in local shops? Do children play in the street? Do residents look after their gardens? What are your participant's neighbours like?
- Such observations can enrich your research and are worth noting. Observations such as these can be seen as creating a field in a method (qualitative interviewing) that often takes place behind closed doors.

Real Life Methods is part of the National Centre for Research Methods which aims to improve research methods across the UK social science community.

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