Faking participant identity: Vested interests and purposeful interference

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Abstract
Misrepresentation and mischief in the research process can impact on ethical conduct, the validity of findings and deliberately change the outcome. This short report presents a scenario about deliberate interference in adoption research by one organisation seeking accreditation to deliver adoption services. Unbeknown to the researchers, fake participants completed an online survey designed to capture the post-adoption needs of adult international adoptees living in Australia. Interference was unexpected as it was naively assumed that all stakeholders involved in adoption would be concerned with meeting post-adoption needs. A definition of politically motivated fake participants, implications for the research process, predicting such interference and strategies to address the problem are discussed.

Keywords
fake participants, research interference, political motivation, transnational adoption

Introduction
Direct interference and mischievous participation in the conduct of research by funders, politicians and participants who meet selection criteria have been reported
in a number of fields (Fish and Russell, 2017; Miller et al., 2017; Prewitt, 2010; Sjöberg, 2015). Reflecting on our own experience of interference in a national research project, the authors were surprised to find that there is a paucity of literature reporting on situations where lay persons pose as legitimate participants with an explicit intent of threatening the integrity and progress of research. After searching the literature using terms such as ‘interference’, ‘fake’, ‘faking’, ‘misrepresentation’ with the terms ‘research’ and ‘participants’, several articles were found that discussed recruitment concerns in web-based research where persons misrepresented themselves for monetary rewards (Kramer et al., 2014; Wessling et al., 2017). Other reports highlight mischievous and jokester responders, particularly in youth research that includes young non-adoptees identifying as adoptees (Miller et al., 2000; Robinson-Cimpian, 2014). However, the authors were unable to locate any reports on participant misrepresentation by lay persons for political gain, or a working definition of the phenomenon. We posit that such interference is political, as agency is exerted to adversely influence the progress and viability of ethically approved research. Agency in these circumstances is essentially a struggle for power over a situation where fake participants have no control over process or outcomes. A tentative definition of interference by faking participant identity with political intent is proposed, and implications for research, indicators to predict such interference and strategies that might help address it are discussed.

Our experience

Our study was a three-stage mixed-method, national investigation of post-adoption support for Australian adult intercountry adoptees: the first, conducting focus groups and developing a questionnaire from focus group data; the second delivering the questionnaire to adoptees nationally; and finally, conducting in-depth interviews.

Adult adoptee participants were recruited by distributing research information via adoptee online forums, social media and adoption organisations and groups in Australia. No financial incentives were offered. One prominent parent lobby group declined to distribute research information and was proactive in discouraging research participation via online adoption groups. During the first week of Stage 2, the delivery of the online survey, a concerned adoptive parent contacted the researchers to report that adoptive parents were accessing and completing the online questionnaire (some on several occasions using multiple identities) and were identifying as adoptee participants. One of the researchers was a member of several online groups about adoption where there is a considerable amount of cross-posting. The researcher received a group email from the founder of the organisation in question asking for volunteers to ‘shut down’ the research. Subsequently, one adoptive parent notified the researchers to advise that he had
completed the survey accidentally, thinking it was for families with younger chil-
dren, and asked for his survey data to be withdrawn.

The conduct of the research was consistent with the methods and materials pre-
viously approved by the university’s Human Research Ethics Committee. Discussions with the Committee resulted in agreement between the researchers and the Committee that the best option was to shut the survey down immediately. The research was then redesigned and ethical approval was granted for a new pro-
ject which was a smaller, qualitative study.

Interference in the study was unexpected, as it was naively assumed that all
stakeholders involved in adoption would be concerned with understanding and
meeting post-adoption needs, especially as the impetus for this study came from
the adult intercountry adoptee community. On reflection, given the contested
nature of intercountry adoption in the Australian context, and although unexpected,
interference was not surprising (Fronek, 2009, 2015; Quartly et al., 2013). This
particular organisation had been lobbying for many years to achieve accreditation
status for the delivery of adoption services. In order to do so, a wholly positive
perspective on adoption was heavily promoted and a celebrity was recruited to the
cause. Alternative narratives in adoption are not always welcome (Kalb, 2012),
and it was concluded that the reporting of potentially negative adoption experi-
ences posed perceived threats to adoption promotion activities and to individual
and organisational goals.

Towards a definition of political interference by fake
participants

Due to the ethical implications and the impact on the integrity of research that
includes responsibilities to participants and the community, sample validity and
the reporting of reliable and valid findings, making ethical threats explicit is
important, particularly in contested research areas. Drawing on the work of Prewitt
(2010) and considerable reflection on our experience, a tentative definition of
political interference by fake participants is proposed as a starting point for under-
standing the phenomenon. Political interference by fake participants can be defined
by political motivation (agency and power struggles) whether personal or organi-
sational, is not driven by financial or other rewards, and involves active, covert
deception with the purpose of negatively impacting on the viability of research or
to manipulate the findings.

Implications

The implications for our research were absolute, and resulted in the cessation of
the project in its intended form. Closure of the survey did cause distress in the
wider adoption community, which was mitigated to some extent by the development of a new project. As researchers, we can only speculate on the consequentialist value system that drives the behaviour of fake participants, and assume there is such a commitment to the benefits of their goals to the exclusion of all other possibilities that the end will no doubt justify the means. Given the anonymous web environment, the potential for fake participation, trolling and the emergence of astroturfing to influence public perceptions, there is significant potential in online research for manipulation when the research is unwanted by sections of the community. Research is often conducted in toxic and contested arenas, and this reflection raises unanswered questions as to the prevalence of political interference by fake participants and the seeming absence of its reporting in the literature.

**Prediction, prevention and corrective strategies**

On reflection, there were several indicators that could predict political interference. Intercountry adoption was known to be a contested area characterised by polarised views. Sections of the community were politically active and perceived a potential personal and political loss if findings did not support their agenda. Campaigning using the media was a known strategy for this organisation, and potential traction in media reporting of the study’s findings posed perceived risks to their political agenda and, as such, could serve as a useful indicator of potential future interference. Finally, the overt lack of co-operation with recruitment was a strong indicator of future resistance.

Although very clear statements that described intended participants and the purpose of the research were provided in participant information, and participants had to click yes or no to confirm that they had read and understood the information to progress to the survey, it could be useful to add an additional statement about the ethics of honest identification and why this is important. This inclusion could deter some fake participants, but overall would be insufficient to those strongly motivated to interfere. For smaller studies, personal contact with potential participants prior to participation would serve as a gatekeeping method and fake participants may be weeded out in future interviews. However, personal contact prior to participation would be resource intensive and could also reduce the number of genuine participants who were only prepared to complete the survey at the time they received it. Such a strategy would not be feasible in larger studies where statistical corrections would be necessary.

Fish and Russell (2017), Kramer et al. (2014) and Wessling et al. (2017) suggest better screening procedures and statistical corrections to address mischievous responders and misrepresentation by participants motivated by financial gain. Robinson-Cimpian (2014) describes sensitivity-analysis methods that may serve as implementable checks. Although not without challenges, the consistent application of such sensitivity analyses is likely to improve our ability to produce sound
research that enhances effective policymaking. Further exploration of these issues and how strategies can be applied to political interference by fake participants is needed, given the seriousness of the impact on ethically conducted research, public perceptions and on the communities whom we are seeking to help.

In conclusion, our experience in this case and the impact on the adoption community highlight the importance of including potential political interference in contested fields of research, and strategies to address it, when applying to research ethics committees, and to include discussion of these issues in the reporting of research.

Funding
All articles in Research Ethics are published as open access. There are no submission charges and no Article Processing Charges as these are fully funded by institutions through Knowledge Unlatched, resulting in no direct charge to authors. For more information about Knowledge Unlatched please see here: http://www.knowledgeunlatched.org

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