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You scratch my back, and I scratch yours:

Bartering for qualitative data

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Abstract

Recruiting research participants has been one of the significant challenges faced by qualitative researchers. Barter gained momentum during the Covid pandemic across a broad spectrum of professionals, including scholars searching to recruit research participants, despite being surrounded by ethical concerns of coercion or undue influence.

This reflective paper created a barter reflective and ethical protocol showing how bartering created the entrepreneurial opportunity for 16 migrant entrepreneurs to exchange an average of 60 minutes of their time for participating in a qualitative interview with an average of 2.25 hrs (145 minutes) of business counselling and translation services delivered by the researcher.

This paper contributes to the methodological practice of bartering. It argues that bartering is an ethical and efficient research practice in need of a code of ethics and protocol and should not be dismissed as ethically suspect until substantial evidence is brought forward.

Keywords: barter, qualitative, incentives, recruitment, interviewees

Introduction

Participants recruitment is perennial for successful research. Yet, it remains a significant challenge, specifically in qualitative studies, where research participation requires time and exposing personal vulnerabilities which demotivate many to take part. It is not uncommon to use different incentives to increase research participation (Parkinson et al., 2019).

With the increasing presence of social media in our everyday and professional lives, every time we click on a social media platform, we exchange our data and our behavioural patterns for opportunities to interact (Hsu et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2014). Yet, we rarely question the ethics of these everyday exchanges because we assume that all parties involved are competent to decide the value of their exchanges (Resnik, 2019). Moreover, every time we engage professionally, we barter our knowledge, although this exchange remains largely invisible. Moreover, this socio-economic and health crisis revived our interest in this Mesopotamian trade system of bartering (Graeber, 2011), giving it a modern social twist representing the social solidarity economy rising during the crisis (Arampatzi, 2020; Kharif, 2020).

Increasingly reported in medical (Resnik, 2019; Vellinga et al., 2020) and survey-based studies (Olsen et al., 2012), this implicit exchange, known as barter, despite being recognised as “an integral feature of any intensive fieldwork study” (Ram, 1999: 96) continues to be regarded as either too controversial, deemed ethically suspect. Furthermore, the researcher and participants become collateral damages, indirectly portrayed as incompetent to carry out a fair and ethical exchange (Resnik, 2019).

Research methods literature and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) offer limited and fragmented ethical guidance on how best to manage the fieldwork reality of “what’s in it for me/us” experienced by researchers and participants alike (Whittle et al., 2014). This

fragmented ethical guidance on the research practice of bartering leaves, particularly, early career researchers *begging* for their data, confused about the importance of reporting on such practice and the research participants feeling either underappreciated because of the unfit financial incentives received or uneasy when asked to volunteer their time for the greater good (Resnik, 2019).

It seems that “what’s in it for me?” is something that concerns all parties involved in research, including researchers working against deadlines and trends to create impactful knowledge and participants who are left feeling useful or used by the researchers who are often too busy with defending and clearing their practice from controversy and ethical suspicions against an unfit universalist ethical framework, perpetuating an inequitable research practice. This universalist approach to ethics forces researchers to either practice “ethics-on-the-go” or selectively reporting their research practices to fit the existing ethical requirements (Warfield, 2019: 2068).

It is against this landscape that it becomes increasingly important to reflect *if there is such a thing as free data?*

This reflective paper answers this question by proposing a reflective and ethical barter protocol that assesses bartering’s fair monetary value for data. In this sense, it argues that bartering should be recognised as a standard research practice across all disciplines and, more specifically, in management and entrepreneurship studies, which is the current focus of this paper. It also argues for proper ethical guidance to support qualitative and quantitative researchers to *fairly* collect their data, providing a win-win collaborative relationship between the research community and participants (Largent and Fernandez Lynch, 2017).

Precisely, this paper reflects on the research practice of bartering in recruiting migrant entrepreneurs for qualitative, face-to-face interviews as part of a broader study carried between 2017-2021. It uses reflective accounts of recruiting and interviewing 16 participants out of the

sample of the general study of 49 participants, who, after being interviewed, asked one of the researchers to return the favour in the tradition of *you scratch my back, I scratch yours*, by providing them business counselling and translation services.

This paper contributes to the literature on research methodology by informing the reflection on bartering as an ethical and efficient, fairness-driven research practice in management and entrepreneurship studies. These insights into the research practice of bartering help narrow the gap between theory and practice by encouraging transparent reporting of such best practices. This collaboration with the participants and the reflections of best practices would result in more impactful research needed in management and entrepreneurship (Dimov et al., 2020; Kapasi and Rosli, 2020).

The remaining of the paper is organised using the following structure. Firstly, a review of the methodological literature on research incentives, focusing on barter as a participants recruitment strategy. It continues with a discussion around the ethical concerns associated with this practice and the ethical guidance available from IRBs to support it. Next, the section, dedicated to reflective and analytical focus, presents the methods used to recruit research participants. Specifically, the reflective field notes and diary entries record the researcher and participants context-bound barter practice. Finally, the section dedicated to *lesson learned* discusses the principles used to design the bartering protocol as an ethical practice and its impact on the overall study. The conclusion reiterates this paper's contribution to methodological literature and research practice in light of its limitations and future research directions.

The landscape of ethical research incentives

One of the most challenging stages of the research process remains recruiting research participants is rarely a simple act of reaching out to the “world of people out there waiting to be interviewed; (where) our job as (social) researchers is to make sure we select the most suitable of these” (Butera, 2006:1263). A consensus among qualitative researchers is that recruitment is challenging, time-consuming, frustrating, and unpredictable, requiring resilience, flexibility, creativity, reflectivity, and negotiation (Gunia and Lewicki, 2020; Kristensen and Ravn, 2015; Wigfall et al., 2013).

Given that these challenges require significant time and effort to overcome, revealing a wide gap between the universalist code of ethics proposed by most IRBs, this probes whether *there is such thing as free data?*

To correctly answer this question requires understanding participants’ motivations to participate in studies and ethical risks associated with these forms of motivation.

Participants’ motivations for enrolling in research

Whilst the researchers’ “what is it for me!” part is well covered in their studies’ contribution to knowledge, research participants have their portfolio of motivations, some more generous than others. Some volunteer for the greater good, some negotiate a fair exchange or barter, and others seek financial compensation or recompensation for their research participation. It is clear that participants’ motives are as varied as those of researchers’ and that their civic reasons or financial motives increase their participation rate in studies (Bowen and Kensinger, 2017; Resnik, 2015; 2019).

Furthermore, when the study focuses on hard-to-reach communities, such as immigrants, often stigmatised in the public host forum (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Moroşanu, 2018; Moroşanu et al., 2015), a reflective and iterative approach to recruiting can clear the access path, enabling effective and efficient recruitment (Chitac and Knowles, 2019).

Among the most visible reasons that motivate subjects to participate in studies are altruism, financial incentives, and others that are less reported, like bartering, social reputation and tokenistic rewards (donation to charity), and public recognition (Parkinson et al., 2019).

Altruism

Altruism is a civic motivation and an essential intrinsic motivation that determines many people to participate in studies (Seymour, 2012). Some participate out of the greatness of their hearts, whilst others for the greater good, as they believe that we all share this social responsibility (Cooper-Robbins et al., 2011).

At first glance, the universalist approach to ethics promoted by most IRBs indicates that researchers are expected to encourage this practice by selling their study to the targeted informants whilst also being cautiously advised not to “not cross the contentious boundaries between truth and exaggeration or between acceptable persuasion and undue coercion”(Williams et al., 2008: 1453). This civic motivation is arguably the one that satisfies the scenario supported by most IRBs and that reinforces the traditional image of the researcher in control. However, aligning with previous evidence, this exposes the wide gap between the institutional code of ethics and the nowadays increasingly symmetric and egalitarian researcher-researched relationship (Anyon et al., 2018).

Financial incentives

There are different ethically approved incentives at researchers' disposal to motivate participants to participate in research. Most of the common types of compensation covered by the IRBs are reimbursements for travelling expenses, gift vouchers, and hourly paid-wage for the time and the effort invested in any particular study (Grady 2005; ONS, 2018). Whilst reimbursement and compensation are justified as service-based payments; recruitment incentives are strategies aimed to increase the research participation rate (Vellinga et al., 2020).

In the UK, these financial incentives are usually of modest value, between £5 to £10, compared to the minimum wage value, which is one of the evaluation strategies used by these researchers. This value increases to £40 to boost the participation rate among hard-to-reach communities or difficult areas, such as London (ESRC, 2019). However, a meta-analysis of the causality between participation rate and higher incentives has not been conclusive in a meta-analysis conducted mainly in the USA (Mercer et al., 2015). This shows that the fairness of such an exchange is contextual and that it depends on the value of the time invested as much as it depends on the interest the participants have in the researched topic and risks associated with their participation (Resnik, 2019).

Barter

On the other hand, barter started as a traditional economic concept, defined by the Father of Modern Economics, Adam Smith (1776, cited in Smith, 2007), as “a natural tendency to exchange things for others”. As the concept captured anthropologists' interest, it shifted its purely economic and capitalist view towards a social perspective, described as an exchange that helps people meet their needs (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones, 1992; Polanyi, 1944).

Nowadays, the most prevalent and ever-increasing form of barter is media barter, when we exchange our data and many times our privacy for the opportunity for online social interactions with our peers via instant messages, email, and photos (Hsu et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2014). This form of barter is seemingly and arguably free in the absence of a physical invoice.

The paradoxical complexity of this exchange consists in achieving reciprocity through the “double coincidence of wants” (Jevons, 1885, cited in Gunia and Lewicki, 2020:562) and being equitable and beneficial for all parties involved (Anderlini and Sabourian 1994, mentioned in Gunia and Lewicki, 2020), whilst its monetarised value and the seeming simplicity of these wants changing hands remain largely invisible (Gunia and Lewicki, 2020).

The difficulty in fulfilling these conditions motivated many professionals, starting with the economists who coined this concept, to consider it a primitive form of exchange compared to the monetary ones (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones, 1994; Roberts, 2011), despite its prevalence in our everyday lives (Gunia and Lewicki, 2020).

However, submerged in our everyday lives, barter increasingly evolved from a primitive, economic exchange (Graeber, 2011) into a complex, contextual social construct (Polanyi, 1944), embedding specific cultural characteristics and human agency, which enables the creation of a varied portfolio of bartering forms (Graeber, 2011). Whilst, barter manifests either as direct exchange (“instant-barter”) or as “delayed-barter”, the acknowledgement and the exercise of its relational aspect is essential (Hsu et al., 2017).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, bartering as a social connection reinforcer has risen, bringing communities together (Gunia and Lewicki, 2020; Lerman, 2020).

It is widely known that recruiting the right participants in research remains a challenging, iterative process for many researchers and particularly for early career researchers and for those

who focus on reaching hard-to-access communities, which share low visibility (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015) and who are socially stigmatised for their diversity (Moroşanu, 2018; Moroşanu et al., 2015). This has been the case for the community of Romanian migrant entrepreneurs in London. Despite one of the researcher's cultural insider positionality, it took the combination of 5 sampling strategies and a time-consuming trust-building relationship approach to gain access and motivate 49 participants to consent to face-to-face interviews (Chitac and Knowles, 2019).

As acknowledged by other migrant scholars, the difficulty of accessing this community was influenced by the shift away from the traditional image of the researcher holding exclusive control over the research process towards a more symmetric and egalitarian researcher-researched relationship (Anyon et al., 2018). Driven by this new approach to knowledge co-creation, which is portrayed as an opportunity to increase research quality and impact (Kapasi and Rosli, 2020), the debate around “what’s in it for me/us” surrounding participants’ recruitment has emerged in this case as well, significantly increasing particularly during recent times of socio-economic upheaval (Gunia and Lewicki, 2020).

This new approach to knowledge co-creation seems to have motivated more informants, particularly hard-to-reach populations, like migrants, to seek incentives in return for their research participation (Knibbs et al., 2018). In support of this trend, an experiment conducted by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Office for National Statistics demonstrated that incentives and particular cash ones increase the participation rate in a survey from 19.4% without incentive to 25.3% with an incentive (Ipsos MORI, 2018). In contrast, the non-financial incentives, such as charitable donations, proved to be motivating for some participants (Gendall and Healey, 2010) and less motivating for others (Pedersen and Nielsen, 2016).

The least visible and least monetised trade system, but possibly one of the most trade systems used in research as it is in our everyday lives (Gunia and Lewicki, 2020), *bartering for data* remains a research practice largely underreported in management and entrepreneurship (Ram, 1997).

Ethical dilemmas surrounding the research incentives

In most cases, these financial and non-financial incentives used to increase the research participation meet the ethical standards (Largent and Fernandez Lynch 2017; Resnik, 2019). However, the controversy arises from their association with the risk of undue influence, particularly when the incentive is exaggerated or when these incentives override the participants' informed consent, jeopardising the overall study's scientific integrity (Largent and Fernandez Lynch 2017).

Undue inducement

Undue inducement refers to exercising influence that compromises a person's decision-making process, motivating them to choose against their best interests or principles. In this sense, incentives could constitute undue inducement if it can be proven that they distorted one's judgment (Largent and Fernandez Lynch 2017; Resnik 2015).

However, the ethical assessment should not be limited to the incentive form, but it should consider the value of incentives for participants. For example, if the participants are well-to-do migrant entrepreneurs, a £20-40 incentive is less likely to be a game-changer for them, whilst the contrary might be expected for a college student. In this case, the participants' motivation

is less likely to be influenced by these incentives, being less likely to be blinded by the risks associated with their participation in research (Ballantyne, 2008; Vellinga et al., 2020).

Whilst this risk should be adequately assessed and managed by researchers, there is also ethical guidance from IRBs on reporting these practices, which also constitutes an essential part of the mandatory research ethics application. This is a preventive measure to ensure that participants' vulnerabilities are not exploited and that the researcher has a proper understanding of the research regulations and the research integrity (Resnik, 2018).

However, we should not forget that institutional review boards have their limitation in processing all the nuances of the research process and that such risks are not always assessed to the full extent of their impact, which could inversely result in unintended harm towards participants. In this case, participants themselves are equally responsible for their well-being, particularly when they discerning adults (Resnik, 2018). As they embark on this collaborative journey alongside researchers, they too share the research process risks and responsibilities and outcomes (Klitzman, 2015; Resnik, 2019).

Of course, there is also evidence suggesting deception by participants, where incentives could motivate participants to distort their profiling to fit the study inclusion criterion. This form of undue influence exposes these participants to reputational risks and even to more physical harmful risks if they participate in unsuitable clinical trials (Resnik, 2019; Resnik and McCaan, 2015).

Coercion

Central to institutional research ethics guidelines is ensuring participants involved consent. In this sense, the participants' autonomy and welfare are prioritised and assured, and thus the risk

of harm is appropriately managed. Therefore, the main concern remains that some incentives could pressure individuals to decide that restrain their autonomy (Gelinas et al., 2019). This risk of coercion is regarded as the use of intimidation that would determine an individual to act against his will and values (Gelinas et al., 2019; Largent et al., 2012). However, coercion is rarely associated with incentives as these are seen as beneficial rather than harmful less likely to occur (Largent et al., 2017).

Whilst the research community is increasingly aware of the presence of these research participation enhancers, in the light of the clear ethical guidance, particularly regarding researchers bartering for science, the ethical controversy of coercion and undue inducement, surrounding these practices pressures many researchers to underreport or even ignore reporting these practices, although most follow an ethical and diligent decision-making process (Hudson et al., 2017).

However, this practice exposes the morally problematic phenomena of coercion and undue influence as subjection, which the presence of such research incentives renders a research practice automatically “morally impermissible” (Deane et al., 2019:29). Thus, in the context of research, barter or other research incentives are perceived by default as consent-undermining practices, discouraged by an abstract, universalist approach to ethics. This is a mistake since fairness and an equitable win-win approach to research should be acknowledged and prioritised in any collaborations, including entrepreneurship research (Deane et al. 2019; Kapasi and Rosli, 2020).

Models for ethical incentives

To tackle some of these ethical dilemmas arising from the lack of a proper code of ethics regarding research incentives, whilst also ensuring that the right and enough subjects are participating in their studies, researchers often use different models to justify the value of the incentives used in motivating participants to take part in their studies (Resnik, 2019). Amongst these, the most common ones are the market model, the reimbursement model, the wage payment model, and the fair share model. (Roche et al., 2013; Saunders and Sugar, 1999).

The Market Model uses financial incentives, such as cash vouchers and prizes, to motivate participants. *The Reimbursement Model* supports the reimbursement of the expenses participants incur to participate in research, most of which are associated with travelling, whilst the *Wage Payment Model* uses a reference point, the “working wage”, to compensate for research participation. Despite being rarely included in the IRBs reviews, the *Fair Share Model* is the only model that aligns closely to the view of collaborative research between researcher and researched, supporting the practice of bartering (Head, 2009; Phillips, 2011; Saunders and Sugar, 1999). Closely linked to the *Fair Share Model* is the Social Exchange Theory (SET), which refers to the exchange behaviour, determined as a non-monetary comparison between cost and benefit, which has at its core the degree of trust between all parties involved in the exchange (Blau, 1964). In this sense, trust enhances the opportunity for reciprocity (Vanneste, 2016), efficient communication (Liang et al., 2016) and fairness, upon which barter exchanges are built (Hsu et al., 2017).

No matter what model researchers decide to use to assess the equitable values of the incentives to motivate participants to enrol in their studies, they have the responsibility to ensure that they do not compromise these individuals’ decision-making process, to voluntarily and honestly consent to this process (Vellinga et al., 2020)

While these models proved helpful in supporting practical and ethical arguments for using incentives to recruit participants across a broad spectrum of studies, the evidence of one being more relevant than the other remains contextual. Trust is a valuable commodity at the heart of qualitative research, influencing the quality and the depth of the data shared (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Therefore, the same importance given to preparing each qualitative interview, to approaching each of the interviewees, should be extended to address these ethical concerns, one by one, for these trustful, co-creative relationships to have a chance of happening. This approach would increase our research practice's sustainability and increase the opportunity for impactful, ethical, and efficient research.

Method: Reflective research protocol for ethical bartering

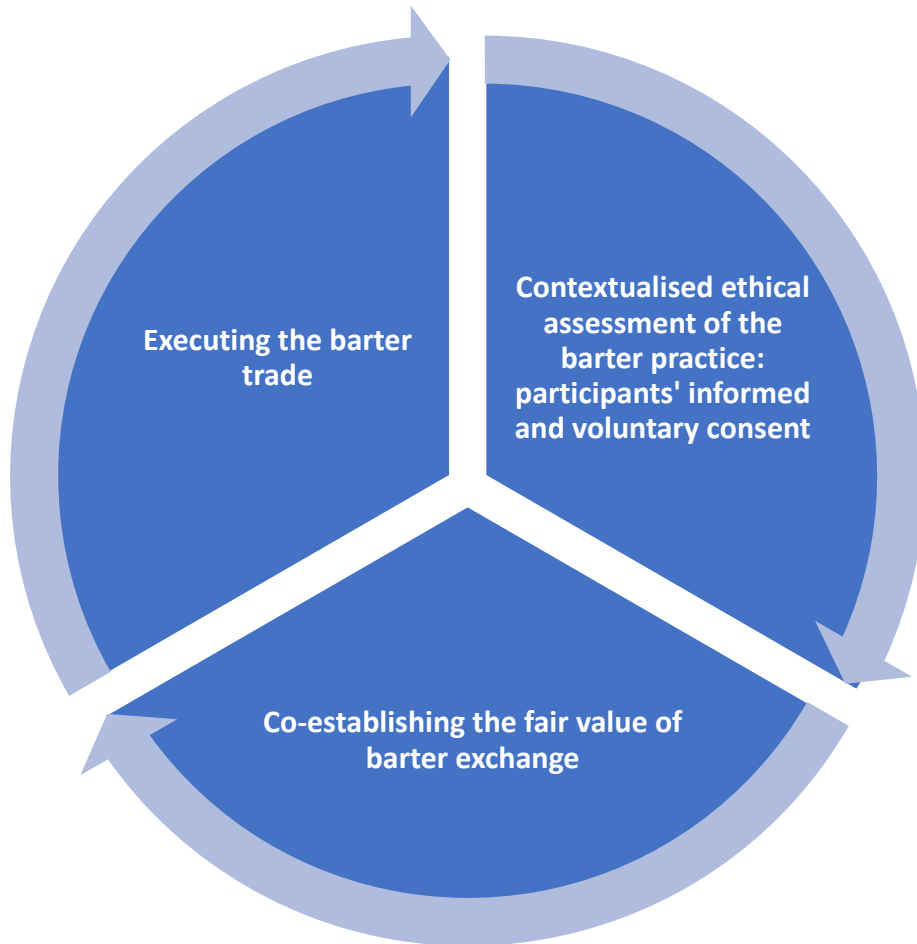
This reflective methodological paper is part of a broader qualitative study focused on London-based Romanian migrant entrepreneurs and their experiences of acculturation through entrepreneurship.

Formulating the barter protocol

This article uses illustrative, context-bound fieldnotes from a qualitative study to showcase bartering research practice and the reflective protocol created to support it.

The barter protocol designed and applied in this study focused on three main stages: contextualising, co-establishing barter's fair value, and its execution.

Diagram 1. The reflective barter protocol



Source: Authors' own based on the methodological literature surveyed

Contextualising barter as a research practice

Similarly to many qualitative researchers, the reality of time and resources scarcity and access barriers when recruiting entrepreneurs or business elites (Deane et al., 2019; Harvey, 2011) has driven the researcher to approach iteratively the sampling (Ling et al., 2018; Waling et al., 2020). This approach meant a detailed and extensive presentation of the study and researcher and combining different sampling traditional and social media sampling techniques, including

derived rapport, time-space, snowball sampling, and e-sampling via Facebook (Chitac and Knowles, 2019).

This community of migrant entrepreneurs has proven hard-to-reach due to its public social stigma in the British society (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015; Moroşanu, 2018); the community's cultural-driven lack of trust and understanding in the research value and impact and the lack of experience in managing professional vulnerabilities (Bonevski et al., 2014).

Additionally, these migrant entrepreneurs' communist and patriarchal upbringings left in their collective memory the vulnerability of "being watched" (Bekmurzaev et al., 2018) and despite the cultural and linguistic insider positionality of one of the lead-researcher, gaining access and sampling within this community has proven very challenging. In most cases, the researcher has been pre-interviewed by the scheduled interviewees. This approach enabled the opportunity to build the required trust and establish cultural and professional bridges between all research parties, which made this study, although challenging and time-consuming, possible (Rantatalo et al., 2018).

This challenge has fuelled the misalignment between the reality of fieldwork and the ethical and theoretical support, revealing limited methodological literature discussing barter as research practice and the universalist approach of the institutional code of ethics, making no references to barter.

Against this fragmented landscape, the iterative and reflective approach to research allowed this challenge to materialise in the opportunity of creating a reflective, analytical protocol to ensure that barter, proposed post-interview by 16 migrant entrepreneurs who voluntarily consented to the study, was ethically sound and fair for both parties involved.

Aware of the researcher's over eight years of professional background in financial analysis and business management, 16 out of 49 migrant entrepreneurs interviewed used this opportunity to

initiate the barter exchange, asking the researcher, post-interview, to return their favour participating in the study by offering professional business support.

However, when I was first served with such an inquiry, I took a step back, ready to delete the recorded data, be aware that I was failing to be fair if I cannot ethically support their request. Coming from a business, financial background, understanding that “there is no such thing as a free lunch” (Smith, 1776) was something that resonated with my state of mind, and thus such request, although new, I saw it as a fair exchange practice. Don’t we barter every day? Why would this be any different?

The first step in my decision-making process was to assess the ethical implications of such a research practice. My focus was to ensure that the trade I was about to enter did not influence or force these participants into enrolling in this study.

Their request for barter came after their consented interviews demonstrated that this played a secondary role and that their participation in this study was voluntary.

Secondly, they exercise no pressure to agree on this exchange, many reinforcing this as a valuable opportunity for their business, rather than a must, as many emphasised:

“I saw that you have extensive experience in business management, and I could use some professional advice on sorting out some issues I currently experience with my business.” (Male entrepreneur 1)

There were also cases when these migrant entrepreneurs were looking for mentors for their workforce, which made me realise the importance and the need to give back with as much openness as possible by participating in my study. Amongst their requests, I recall when I was asked:

“Can you help another fellow Romanian struggling in the British Court because he cannot pay an interpreter?” (Women entrepreneur 4).

Or

“Can you mentor my daughter? She could use your guidance regarding her career path and in choosing a good university to go to.” (Male entrepreneur 4).

Their concern for the other made me realise that giving back to the community who dedicated their time to support this study was far from being “morally impermissible” (Deane et al., 2019:29) consent-undermining practice, but it was a gesture of being human and fair.

However, the barter’s decision-making process relied on prioritising and ensuring above all that informed written consent was given voluntarily by each of the participants and that no coercion or undue influence was exercised.

In this sense, all the participants were well informed using proper written documentation (i.e. participant information form) and verbal clarification of all the implications of their participation in this study (Israel and Hay, 2006). Furthermore, consistent with the principle of voluntary and consented participation, they were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any explanation (Vanclay et al., 2013).

Co-establishing the fair value of the barter: principles and ethical decision-making

This initial stage is critical in assessing and establishing the premises for ethical barter exchange. During this stage, Kitchener’s (1984) principles constituted the foundation of ethical exchange, allowing all parties involved to discuss the extent to which this exchange will benefit

all parties (Beneficence), it will induce no harm (Nonmaleficence), it will be fair (Justice); it will promote integrity (Fidelity) and responsible research practice (Autonomy).

Guided by these ethical principles and following the institutional code of ethics, the researcher should pursue research collaboration with research participants after their written consent and after all the research-related questions raised have been answered.

Some scholars argue that barter exchange is primarily a matter of moral duty and reciprocal fairness (Hsu et al., 2017). This article discusses that transparency and negotiation are essential in barter for this trade to be fair, like in any formal or informal contract one enters. Using a value reference system, such as a wage model or fair share value, helps all parties involved in the barter set up and meet realistic expectations of this trade whilst managing the risk of exploitation of all those involved.

Specifically, to establish the monetised value of fair exchange in this context, the researchers relied on The Fair Share and Wage Payment Models. In practice, this meant that the research participants and the lead researcher negotiated and agreed to barter a max of 3 hrs of researcher's business and mentoring expertise for 3 hrs of participants' time spent in this study (1hr of interviewing and 2 hrs of commuting in London traffic).

This approach reinforces that an ethical practice of barter relies on distributive justice, communication and trust. It is Homans and Merton's (1961) idea of *distributive justice* that the researcher sought to manage by balancing participants' time (interview and commuting) with the time she also volunteered to support their business interests (Hsu et al., 2017). This professional collaboration was ethical as it allowed the freedom for all parties involved to voluntarily consent and co-establish the fair value of this barter exchange, which was initiated and took place after the research interview.

Communication proved to be key in ensuring ethical barter, as formal and informal information was timely exchanged and upon which the trust between researcher and participants has been established (Mukherjee and Nath, 2007, cited in Hsu et al., 2017) using, in this case, transparent valuation models (Resnik, 2019; Roche et al., 2013).

Specifically, the researcher and participants who initiated the barter reached the informal agreement to dedicate up to 3 hrs of their expertise to this exchange, a deal which has been kept except for referees and gatekeepers, who, in the light of the principle of fairness, have also dedicated more time to this study.

Executing the barter exchange

The barter materialised in these participants asking the researcher, post-interview, for an average of a 60-minute interview to give them in exchange an average of 2.25 hrs (145 minutes) of business counselling, mentorship advice, and translation services. A time-based perspective of this barter is captured in the table below:

Table 1: Time-based perspective of this study's barter exchange

Participants code	Highest level of education	SIC Industries	Bartering service	Bartering time in minutes
Male entrepreneur 1	Bachelor Degree	Consumer goods & services	Business analysis	75
Male entrepreneur 3	High School	Construction & Real Estate	Brainstorming business diversification	40
Male entrepreneur 4	Bachelor Degree	Consumer goods & services	Educational counselling	85
Male entrepreneur 5	Bachelor Degree	Management consultancy	Assessing the business website	50
Male entrepreneur 11	Master Degree	Consumer goods & services	Formulating a hiring ad	35
Male entrepreneur 14	High School	Consumer goods & services	Assisting with recruitment (designing interview questions)	45
Male entrepreneur 16	Bachelor Degree	Construction & Real estate	Assisting with recruitment (reviewing job applications)	45
Male entrepreneur 18	High School	Construction & Real Estate	Reviewing some presentations	270
Male entrepreneur 22	High School	Construction & Real Estate	Translate a contract	150
Male entrepreneur 29	Bachelor Degree	Construction & Real estate	Business brainstorming for a growth opportunity	150
Women entrepreneur 1	Master Degree	Consumer goods & services	Reviewing a business plan	130
Women entrepreneur 2	High School	Consumer goods & services	Business analysis for expansion	170
Women entrepreneur 3	High School	Consumer goods & services	Assessing venues for advertising	100
Women entrepreneur 4	Master Degree	Consumer goods & services	Document translation & recruiting & educational mentorship	430
Women entrepreneur 5	Bachelor Degree	Management consultancy	Assessment of a research proposal	160
Women entrepreneur 13	High School	Consumer goods & services	Assisting with recruitment (Interview questions, advert, and interviewing)	230
Total minutes				2165
Total hours				36.0833333
Average time/barter				2.255 hrs

Source: Fieldwork 2018-2019

The topic of bartering remains scarce and fragmented in qualitative research, met with reserves by the broader community of researchers, which often ignore the favours and professional support or on-site counselling many may have traded for a face-to-face interview the name of science (Deane et al., 2019). Yet, these field notes revealed that bartering is a practical, fair and ethical research practice. As time becomes a limited commodity these days and our portfolio of social and professional roles expands, researchers are more sensitive to time inefficiencies alongside many other professions. Therefore, many become increasingly accustomed to paying for their data through an institutional subscription to barter for data. All these exchanges have a value in bartering remains invisible, in monetary value and as a research practice, despite being easily convertible in work hours and thus money.

These fieldnotes emphasise the morality, trust, communication, and distributive justice rulings embedded in barter. Reasoning with Chan and Li (2010) and Hsu et al.'s(2017) perspectives of barter reciprocity, in the context of this study, the participants and the researchers share the fairness of this reciprocity, where they reach an informal agreement of reciprocated acts, which is, in this case, means exchanging participants' time and effort taking part in a one-hour qualitative interview for three-hour of business counselling services. In Humphrey's words: "individuals stand in a relation of moral obligation based on mutual exchange of equivalent sacrifices (or goods)" (Humphrey, 1992).

Lessons learned and contribution

Whether incentives-driven participation compromises the integrity of the participant's decision to enrol in research remains an important empirical and ethical question (London et al., 2012; Resnik, 2018; 2019).

In this case, there is a need for evidence-based cases to become part of the ongoing ethics discussions so that researchers are more prepared for the fieldwork's reality. The current hand-out of an ethically idealistic research journey is far from reflecting the fieldwork reality across many disciplines, including management and migrant entrepreneurship. The vulnerabilities and the fairness required to encourage impactful knowledge co-creation is hardly a matter of ticking the ethics boxes; it becomes a question of moral value for many early-career researchers like myself.

Based on the reflective field notes capturing the research practice of barter illustrated in the previous section, this paper exposes lessons learned that emphasise the opportunity and the importance of barter as an ethical research practice in qualitative research.

Barter as a reflective and ethical research practice

This article contributes to the methodological literature in management and entrepreneurship by demonstrating that, despite the lack of clear ethics governing this research practice, barter can be an efficient, ethical research practice in participant recruitment. Furthermore, it reinforces the need for proper ethical representation in the institutions' reviews and ethical research committees by revealing the demotivating and underreporting misalignment between the institutional research ethics and barter research practice.

Reporting reflective and ethical protocols and best practices of such research practices would encourage future generations of researchers to plan and organise efficiently and realistically their research journeys, prepared to negotiate ethical win-win collaboration instead of *begging* for data. Thus, this approach would support impactful and ethical research (Kapasi and Rosli, 2020).

The lead researcher followed the institutional ethics protocol by submitting and receiving ethics committee approval and discussed openly and constantly with the supervisory research team any fieldwork ethical dilemmas experienced. More importantly, the researcher ensured that the participants were adequately informed about the study and all the implications of their consent and their right to withdraw from it anytime without explanations. Therefore, the standard ethical research requirements were met and strengthened through detailed and transparent reporting and dissemination of all the research practices to ensure research integrity.

Reflecting upon managing the ethical risks of coercion and undue influence surrounding research incentives, this case study exposed barter trade as an equitable exchange, which prioritised the autonomy of the decision-making of all parties involved. In this respect, following principles of research documented by previous scholars (Head, 2009; Phillips, 2011; Saunders and Sugar, 1999), the researcher welcomed the post-interview participants' inquiry to return the favour, guided by two reference models, the *Wage Payment Model* and the *Fair Share Model* as a means to compensate for research participation.

Some scholars would disagree with this Wage Payment Model used, which monetised barter, contradicting its social nature (Gunia and Lewicki, 2020). However, in this context, it helped assess the exchange's fairness and created clear ethical boundaries for all parties involved.

Bartering relationships

Resonating with Ram Monder's experience, recruiting participants in this study proved that "fieldwork relationships rarely remain static; they "evolve" over time and in so doing they develop distinctive dynamics and logics of their own." (Ram, 1999:100). This aligns with the shift towards a collaborative research approach, with the traditional role of the researcher in control being replaced by a myriad of alternative professional relationships, which redefine the research process, empowering all parties involved.

This paper demonstrated that as a research practice, barter is far from being a purely economic exchange system, but it has an essential contextual and cultural social meaning, involving " a constellation of features not all of which are necessarily present in any particular instance. " (Humphrey, 1922: 250). This implies that regardless of its "delayed" transpired in this study, barter should be treated as a phenomenon of a polythetic category, whilst careful considerations should be given to its essential characteristics: reciprocity, social relations, disintegration, information and valuation.

This approach shows that the researcher and participants' relationship is far from being a one-off, static qualitative research encounter. Instead, it proved to be a dynamic negotiation process and trustful exchanges that bring people together to collaborate across professional fields (Chughtai and Myers, 2017; Ram, 1999; Van Maanen, 2011). This could mark the moot point in knowledge co-creation.

The methodological literature on barter remains fragmented at best, overshadowed by a formalist and universalist approach to ethical research practice. Far from being a processor of money, or primitive trade practice (Graeber, 2011), this paper demonstrated that barter is an

essential yet invisible research practice built on trust and reciprocity that requires careful and contextual ethical and equitable assessment.

The invisible value of barter in research

Empirical evidence is divided when it comes to the impact of timing of research incentives on the participation rate or the costs of conducting research, with scholars suggesting no effect (Chin et al., 2015), whilst others demonstrated high costs associated with the gradual delivery of these incentives (Devine et al., 2015).

In this context, the barter was initiated by participants post-interview, and the exchange took place within the first week after the interview. However, there were a few instances where the participants become gatekeepers and recommended other participants. In this case, planned or not by these participant-gatekeepers, the barter trade was expanded beyond the researcher's threshold of 3 hrs initially set up. For example, the most extensive barter included 430 minutes of counselling, translations, and mentorship for a participant-gatekeeper who referred to 4 other participants who enrolled in this study. Therefore, although, at first glance, this might not seem fair, if we consider 180 minutes for each of the participants referred, then the time and expertise barter by the researcher seems fair overall.

These lessons expose the research process's dynamic nature and the importance of reflection to overcome challenges and advance barter as an ethical research practice.

This paper encourages a positive view and reflective protocol of barter which is part of qualitative fieldwork. It shows that bartering for science should not be regarded as ethically suspect but should be supported by a code of ethics that encourages fair and equitable partnership between researchers and participants. This approach would support impactful

research and build the confidence needed amongst scholars to share fresher perspectives of research practices and engage reflectively and iteratively with research, recognising that its dynamic nature is an opportunity to create new knowledge.

Although it may seem that barter is grounded in an economic theory of exchange, in the context of this study, barter is a complex, sophisticated phenomenon, which proves the resourcefulness of people in findings ways to build relationships, gain access to knowledge. This evidences not only that the concept is contextual, cultural and shaped by the human agency.

Formulating an ethical code for barter research practice

Bartering is an ethical recruitment research incentive if the research participant initiates it and its terms are negotiated and agreed upon by all parties involved, with careful assessment of meeting ethical principles of Beneficence, Nonmaleficence, Justice, Fidelity and Autonomy.

Any incentive, including barter, must not override participants' freely given and fully informed consent. Bartering for research data may be documented in writing whenever possible and may be conducted only if: the research participant requests it and when the collaboration is not exploitative.

When in doubt of the barter's fair value, they are about to enter all parties involved could use Market, Reimbursement or Wage Payment Models to establish it.

Limitations and future research suggestions

This paper's contribution to knowledge should be considered in the light of its limitations, amongst which the most relevant are: it uses context-bound fieldnotes from a qualitative study, which limits its generalisability, and it presents the perspective of the researcher, rather than multiple or diverse perspectives of the phenomenon of barter.

In the light of these limitations, it would be beneficial for researchers and participants alike to engage in a cross-generational and cross-professional dialogue to narrow the gap between the overall universalist approach to ethics and the reality of fieldwork.

Future exploration of these ethical concerns on incentives from a broader spectrum of perspectives would help design ethical and practical decision-making research protocols, offering a clear understanding of the impact of the incentives on the integrity and the outcome of these practices in general. In addition, this approach would increase the research quality by increasing the trustworthiness and the transparency of the reporting.

By detailing this reflective and analytical protocol used to assess bartering as an equitable exchange between researchers and participants, this paper showed the importance of sharing such practices, a reporting practice from which ethics committees and researchers could benefit from if others would join in to expand this evidence-based repertoire of best practices needed to develop cross-cultural and interdisciplinary, impactful research.

During these Covid crises, the barter became an enforcer of social connections, an opportunity to express kindness, and secure essentials (Gunia and Lewicki, 2020). Thus, it is the right time to reconsider and assess the importance of barter in our everyday lives and research.

Conclusion

Recruitment plays a critical part in our journeys as researchers across all disciplines. Notably, it becomes a complex journey of building trust for the qualitative researcher, addressing human vulnerabilities on the go, a journey of understanding and empathising with participants (Brown, 2019). As qualitative researchers, we become custodians of participants' entrusted stories, taking on the great responsibility of amplifying and preserving these stories' authenticity (Noon, 2018; Smith, 2019). This trust reinforces the importance of moral fairness and equitable collaboration between researchers and participants. Despite being underreported by many scholars and ethics committees, research incentives increasingly become part of this scientific partnership (Resnik, 2019).

This paper shows that, despite being an invisible part of the broader controversy surrounding incentives to enrol research participants, barter remains a common yet rarely talked about research practice, becoming the collateral damage of this methodological and ethical controversy. Despite the lack of clear ethical guidance from IRBs, which erodes researchers' confidence to report this practice, these context-bound reflective fieldnotes expose barter as an ethical, practical, and equitable research practice for all parties involved (Gunia and Lewicki, 2020).

These evidence-based practices help develop a disaggregated code of ethics to replace the current, universalist approach, addressing the need for a code of ethics that includes incentives' best practices that give particularly to less experienced researchers the needed confidence and it ensures research integrity. Moreover, they lay the foundation to replace the practice of "ethics-on-the-go" with sound and specific research practice tools (Vellinga et al., 2020; Warfield, 2019).

It is against this landscape that a system of ethical incentives to encourage research participation, which is increasingly justified by the time and resource scarcity experienced by all parties involved, is needed. This would help overcome this misfortune that the qualitative researcher is more likely reported to face when offering incentives to its participants and ensuring objective ethical support and efficient research practice. Although still catching up with these socio-economic changes, the research practice reflects some (Brown, 2019).

We hope that this evidence-based paper will advance the methodological knowledge on bartering as ethical research practice and lead to more informed and practical use.

This reflective paper concludes that although often veiled in secrecy, barter trade is, in entrepreneurship research, an implicit and fair exchange of skills and knowledge that shouldn't be discredited from the beginning as ethically suspect. Furthermore, it contributes to the methodological literature by creating an ethically driven analytical protocol for bartering as a research practice.

Ethical Statement

This reflective paper is part of a study carried out following the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) and the approval of the University Ethics Committee completed in June 2018. Accordingly, all the research participants gave their informed and voluntary consent after being adequately informed verbally and in writing about all the implications of their participation in the study. Furthermore, consistent with the principle of transparency of research practice and do no harm, participants' privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were ensured following the university's code of ethics.

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