



10

Respecifying Fieldwork: Refused Knowledge Communities Explored Through the Reflexive Lens

Barbara Morsello 

10.1 Introduction

Conducting qualitative fieldwork on refused knowledge-based social worlds, as well as building relationships with members of refused knowledge communities (RKC)s for research purposes, can be a challenging task for scholars exploring current ways in which the epistemic authority of science is being contested. Indeed, as has been highlighted by scholars engaged in the social studies of conspiracy cultures (Harambam, 2020a; Lepselter, 2016), followers of refused knowledge are not necessarily well disposed, or willing, to establish a dialogic relationship with academic researchers.

Indeed, refused knowledge followers share a widely held belief that academics in general act as spokespersons for epistemic regimes that they see as responsible for rejecting competing knowledge and claims at the margins of science, beyond the legitimate public debate. An additional

B. Morsello (✉)

Department of FISPPA, University of Padova, Padova, Italy

e-mail: barbara.morsello@unipd.it

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element at stake in conducting fieldwork on RKC is related to the fact that their members may hold beliefs, values, assumptions and political positions in sharp contrast to those of researchers themselves (Kelley et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, in adopting a reflexive stance, this chapter explores the challenges that researchers engaged in studying the four RKC considered in this volume (see the Introduction of this volume) faced in their attempts to negotiate and conduct interviews with refused knowledge followers.

In so doing, I will argue that reflecting on how researchers handled the RKC interaction can provide relevant insights regarding the motivations and concerns driving people to dispute and distrust epistemic institutions. I thus highlight that *in itinere* reflexivity during fieldwork as well as an ex-post and distributed reflexivity may be crucial strategies.

Therefore, this chapter is based on a reflexive analysis of the various empirical materials I collected as a researcher conducting fieldwork on refused knowledge-based social worlds: (1) field notes (such as audio, visual and/or written materials) detailing interactions with members of the pro-vaccine choice community—the RKC I was most interested in; and (2) in-depth interviews with members of my research team regarding critical issues they faced in planning and conducting interviews with the four RKC with which we interacted during our research.

Field notes, as well as interviews with members of my research team, supported me in recollecting my fieldwork experiences and inspired my ex-post reflections on the action taken. All the materials were scrutinised with reflexive sensitivity. This deepened my understanding of how those who embrace refused knowledge relate to individuals rejecting the knowledge they believe in and was made possible by focusing mainly on how the researchers conducting the fieldwork were viewed by the RKC. Generally speaking, RKC see academic researchers as part of an epistemic regime depicted in the public sphere as bearer of ‘an epistemic supremacy’ towards other forms of knowledge (Grodzicka & Harambam, 2021).

During the fieldwork, RKC showed an ambivalent attitude to the assumption according to which society bestows ‘epistemic superiority’ upon academics and, in general, members of other scientific communities. On one hand, they attempted to exploit the interview interaction to

dispute the alleged epistemic authority of the researcher. On the other, research participants occasionally attempted to instrumentally turn such authority to their advantage with a view to disseminating refused knowledge claims and legitimising them beyond their specific social world of reference, thereby framing academic researchers as certifiers of ‘epistemic reliability’.

Despite refused knowledge followers’ ambivalent relationship with the academic researchers, my colleagues in the research team conducting this fieldwork and I were able to establish a trusting relationship with some members of the RKC by adopting the symmetry principle (Bloor, 1976; Wyatt, 2008; Lynch, 2020) and, by embracing epistemic agnosticism (see Chap. 2 by Federico Neresini), we fostered greater engagement in the research.

The remainder of this chapter is organised as follows. Section 10.1 provides an account of how reflexivity was entrenched in my fieldwork, particularly in the preliminary phases involved in building a trusting relationship with pro-vaccine choice for interview purposes. By analysing how the research team was viewed by respondents, Sect. 10.2 examines the way RKC alternatively represented researchers as ‘impostors’ (see paragraph 2.1) to be avoided or, by contrast, as ‘epistemic certifiers’ to be marshalled to improve the RKC’s reputation (see paragraph 2.2). This shows us the various legitimisation strategies in action, specifically boundary work and mimicry, which were explored in detail in the other chapters (see Chap. 2 by Federico Neresini and Chap. 7 by Stefano Crabu).

10.2 Negotiating Relationships with RKC as a Matter of Reflexivity

Gaining access to fieldwork is often problematic in qualitative research. In addition, researchers face challenging social interactions in negotiating relationships with research participants. Access to fieldwork is not, in fact, linear but rather a fluid, multifaceted and temporary process, simultaneously requiring researchers to be sensitive to what is going on in the field (Cunliffe, 2011), which implies acknowledging the implications of

negotiating access and building relationships with research participants (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). Negotiating access to the research field involves much more than entering an organisation, a community or a group and persuading participants to provide data. Generally speaking, negotiation begins with making calls, sending emails and writing letters to community gatekeepers (Fobosi, 2019) and does not end once fieldwork has been accessed or when approval for interviews has been obtained. Building relationships with participants is an ongoing process requiring careful management by researchers (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013).

This implies that practicing reflexivity, as an ordinary, unremarkable and unavoidable feature of action (Lynch, 2000), can help researchers take stock of their own biases, experiences and assumptions and the social and cultural contexts in which the interaction with research participants occurs (Watt, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Maynard, 2003; Hammersley, 2019; Kenney, 2015; Cardano, 2014). This is a significant aspect to qualitative research because it also leads to a more accurate and valid interpretation of the data (Gouldner, 1968, 1971; Eriksson et al., 2012; Etherington, 2006). From this perspective, a few salient aspects need to be reflexively retraced.

First, taking charge of studying the pro-vaccine choice RKC involved a great effort on my part to negotiate an interaction space with them, maintaining high-quality access and improving our relationship by enhancing their trust in me and thus participation in the research. This was particularly important with other RKCs as well because, as we will see in Sect. 10.2, such communities are not generally willing to be interviewed and often have conflictual attitudes to researchers. During the initial steps of fieldwork negotiation, I realised that the issue at stake was not merely a matter of recruiting individuals for interviews, but of negotiating a trusting relationship with them and addressing their initial concerns. The perpetual risk of being rejected, in fact, emphasises the importance of re-strategising (Peticca-Harris et al., 2016) because achieving the trust of research participants is never absolute or given, but continuously negotiated.

All this meant that one of my ongoing strategies was spending time with research participants and joining their initiatives, from public demonstrations to local online groups and chats on WhatsApp or Telegram. I

also invited a few of them to go out for a drink or for a walk in a public garden before the interviews. I met pro-vaccine choice physicians and nurses in hospitals and carefully listened to their reservations regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination. Keeping in touch with followers of the RKC's studied was certainly a preliminary condition for successful fieldwork. However, spending time with them, being responsive to their questions, engaging in discussions, being welcomed into their homes before interviews where we shared lunches, dinners and conversations constantly evoked certain emotions, reactions and experiences that generally foster, rather than hinder, understanding of the world studied (Davies & Spencer, 2010; Behar, 1996). After a few encounters, I realised that these subjective experiences involved in negotiating research relationships with RKC's were not merely 'wasted time' before interviews but primary source of data to be translated, through careful reflection, into precious insights (Ploder & Hamann, 2020; Müller, 2016). Thus, being reflexive about this ongoing process of negotiation became an integral part of my understanding of them, providing insights into what leads people to engage in challenging epistemic institutions and distrust the knowledge generated by them.

Being welcomed into respondents' homes also helped me to grasp what adhering to, and supporting, refused knowledge in everyday life means. For example, meeting a mother who resigned from her job to home school her children, having lunch with a family which refuses technology in the form of a modern kitchen, TV or even a fridge in order to cultivate a more respectful attitude to life on our planet and so on were significant opportunities for trust-building as well as for consideration of the practical implications of embracing refused knowledge in everyday life from an insider perspective. This enhanced my understanding of the extent to which refused knowledge regarding health care or well-being is deeply rooted in a specific world view with profound repercussions on people's everyday lives and requiring great effort. In fact, RKC members frequently showed me their diets and supplements, the scientific papers they had found and the books they read as well as certain self-produced materials (Fig. 10.1) related to their life choices and support for their claims. This challenged me to read the documents and other materials they gave me, watch documentaries regarding the alleged (but not



Fig. 10.1 Self-produced book by the pro-vaccine choice community entitled *The Hidden Damage*. (Picture taken by the author)

scientifically demonstrated) link between vaccinations and autism and return to them to discuss what I saw or read.

Before meeting pro-vaccine choice followers, it was important to acquire ‘native competence’ (Collins, 1998; Laudel & Gläser, 2007), without which I would not have been able to understand their claims, opinions and frames of reference. Indeed, respondents were frequently disappointed when I did not know what they were talking about or, by contrast, were pleased and amazed when I showed that I knew their references or the experts they considered reliable. Being aware of their opinions and claims, as well as their sources of information, was not only a means with which to gain their acceptance but also a way of being seen

by them as someone who wanted to know more about them beyond the stereotypes recurrent in the public sphere which discursively frame pro-vaccine choice followers as ignorant, misinformed and irrational.

This also gave me a chance to get closer to their point of view on reality. Consequently, for example, one research participant gave me a ‘gift’: a book with over 500 personal stories of supposed vaccine damage collected by a local pro-vaccine choice community and paid for via crowdfunding (Fig. 10.1). On numerous other occasions pro-vaccine choice followers provided me with their sources or suggested reading to increase my knowledge of their reasons for refusing vaccinations. During the fieldwork, some of them also sent me links to blogs, news or videos they considered important on WhatsApp or invited me to join group chats on Telegram in which they shared news, events and discussions. This gave me an insight into the substantial amount of time they spend selecting their informative sources by reading books and articles and collecting information they considered relevant in support of their cause.

To support my reflexive approach, at such times I collected field notes to document my experiences with the pro-vaccine choice followers and record comments and discussions when we were not audio-recorded (Eriksson et al., 2012). My field notes were essential and enabled me to record episodes of rejection and hostility to my invitations to take part in the research.

Furthermore, my field notes also gave me the chance to reflect on how the research context—by which I mean specific sociocultural events or conditions with the potential to affect the phenomenon studied—shaped my encounters with research participants and the interview setting, as has been noted by many others, such as Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018) and Mauthner and Doucet (2003). Moreover, studies on conspiracy cultures have shown that the research context in which participants, and researchers, are embedded is key to achieving a more in-depth understanding of communities centred on alternative or refused knowledge and belief systems (Harambam, 2020a).

In my case, during my fieldwork with pro-vaccine choice supporters, the COVID-19 pandemic was an event that played a leading role in reconfiguring my strategies for interacting with research participants, as well as those of my colleagues, requiring changes to research participant

recruitment, reconsideration of the form and venue of interviews and a consideration of the changes implied by the different settings. In fact, online calls were made in certain cases in accordance with social distancing measures, even if this sacrificed the familiarity that in-person interviews give or, by contrast, opting for in-person interviews whilst being aware that it was potentially dangerous.

The presence of this global outbreak in the background of our research was an unfortunate circumstance in many respects, despite offering a unique opportunity to understand the RKC's viewpoint. Indeed, the strict virus containment restrictions adopted in Italy forced the RKC's out into the open with their different approach to life and health (see Crabu, in this book), requiring them to adopt a public stance on mandatory vaccinations and/or anti-COVID norms such as mask-wearing and testing when these became prerequisites to entering social spaces and taking part in public life. Simultaneously, this situation heightened our risk of rejection by the RKC's, with suspicion by them occasionally prompting them to withdraw their availability for interviews, as I will examine in greater depth in Sect. 10.2. It is well-known, in fact, that pandemics exacerbate social relationships between people who support public policy and those who oppose them (Cohen, 1973; Lasco, 2020; Lasco & Curato, 2019). Over the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was easy to find public demonstrations and people expressing their disagreement with anti-COVID measures or vaccinations (Fig. 10.3) by leaving messages all over various cities, as Fig. 10.2 shows. Public spaces became RKC conflict arenas (see Morsello, Neresini and Agodi in this book) and required greater effort by researchers to build a trusting relationship with research participants, as the next section makes clear.

In my case, the complexities involved in building lasting relationships of trust with pro-vaccine choice supporters for research purposes and the conflict characterising the general social context in which my research was conducted prompted me to reflexively share such experiences with my colleagues. During the weekly/monthly meetings with my research team, my colleagues and I often shared our field experiences and these became powerful insights with which to reframe our understanding of our subjective experiences with RKC's and the peculiarities of each community. Moreover, the wealth of experiences reported within these group



Fig. 10.2 'Breathe. Their cure is worse than the disease'. (Trento, 12/12/2020, picture taken by the author)

discussions convinced me to implement a distributed reflexive activity process (Cunliffe, 2020; Gherardi et al., 2018; Lynch, 2017) in the research group once the data collection process had ended. I did so by inviting the researchers to personal interviews with me and they all accepted my invitation. My three in-depth interviews with members of the research teams directly in charge of the fieldwork with Stop 5G, Alkaline Water and 5BL communities were designed to collect in-depth accounts of the main problems encountered in building a relationship with RKC's followers.

What I did, in fact, was to ask my colleagues to report episodes that were significant for them, focusing on their relationships with the RKC's, thereby highlighting the difficulties bound up with recruitment but also fostering reflection on the strategies used to cope with the main problems associated with working with RKC's during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Fig. 10.3 'No compulsory vaccination'. Public demonstration against anti-COVID vaccination. (Trento, 5/07/2021, picture taken by the author)

10.3 The Complicated Relationship Between RKC's and Academic Researchers

In reflecting on how the relationship the research team and I developed with RKC's members evolved, two main aspects required particular attention. I focused on how researchers were experienced by interviewees, who alternatively attempted both to question researchers' epistemic authority and to take advantage of it to gain visibility and improve their own reputations. In this sense, researchers were alternatively framed as 'impostors' (see Sect. 10.3.1) and 'epistemic certifiers' (see Sect. 10.3.2).

10.3.1 'You are a Charlatan!': Academic Researchers as Imposters

As I mentioned earlier, the project's researchers were experienced as impostors by RKC members. Woolgar et al. (2021) defines imposters as engines of indeterminacy, uncertainty and disorder and observing the frictions and disruptions related to them can provide significant insights into the constitutive dynamics of the social relations and cultural settings of the communities observed.

'Imposters' are a topic of interest in social science and humanities and Woolgar et al. (2021) simply define them as individuals who pretend to be someone else to deceive others, thereby disrupting the social order. Suspicions of this sort have a profound impact on people's lives and social interactions within groups primarily because 'imposters mean trouble and stir a wide range of societal responses ranging from intrigue to suspicion, from outrage to horror' (Woolgar et al., 2021, p. 3). For these reasons, in our case, not only did being framed as impostors enormously complicate relationship building with RKC members but it also shed light on the dynamic by which RKC members assess the institutions researchers belong to.

In my case, in fact, each individual interview with pro-vaccine choice supporters resulted in a major, time consuming and occasionally exhausting negotiation during which I was given 'the third degree' and doors were often shut in my face for a variety of reasons: 'we don't want to give more tools to the institutions to figure out how to convince us to vaccinate', 'we have already trusted you (academics) once and our words were misunderstood!', to cite just a few examples. During one interview I was accused of being 'the perfect pawn in the system' by a doctor who did not want to be audio-recorded. What he meant was that even though I presented myself as a university researcher, in his opinion I was part of a wider power system designed to collect information on citizens out of step with prevailing opinions—for example, on anti-vaccination norms. His accusation was based on the fact that as a young woman belonging to what he conceived of as the 'academic elite' I came across as trustworthy increasing the likelihood that ordinary people would be taken in by me,

as he saw it. Being framed as part of the ‘academic elites’ also often implied being considered an impostor attempting to obtain information on RKC, potentially leading to refusal to take part in interviews or rejecting all contact with researchers, as one of my colleagues who dealt with the Stop 5G community reports:

Because anyway, I have to say that everyone was very distrustful of me precisely because they identified us as the ‘academic elite’ and for this reason it was difficult to gain their trust in some cases. (...) I realised that there was very strong resistance, hostility toward academia or, more generally, toward knowledge not considered ‘valid’ by them. The first contacts I made for the interview (...) were always rejected outright or totally ignored. (Transcript of researcher interview, 10/06/2022)

From the RKC’s perspective, the ‘academic elites’ were conceived of as having a supreme epistemic authority in science-related decisions and orienting policy as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. In certain cases, it seems reasonable that academia can be considered a rather powerful, elite institution (Kelley & Weaver, 2020) and regarded as having epistemic authority in the public sphere. However, for a few respondents, this superiority led to charges of financial gain by this purported ‘academic elite’, much to the detriment of citizens. In fact, the universities and academics in general are often seen by RKC as part of a belief system created to further the economic and political interests of private biotech corporations (Mede & Schäfer, 2020).

Other reasons underlie RKC lack of trust in academics and their labelling of them as impostors. In certain cases, they believe that academics address their concerns and claims in a manner considered ‘unfair’ or ‘inaccurate’ and are consequently sometimes extremely reluctant to engage in trusting relationships with them (Emerson & Pollner, 2001). Another problem, as Chess and Shaw (2015) have argued, is that many academic discourse conventions and everyday practices can come across as mysterious and threatening to lay people and anxieties regarding what academics may be doing with their words was found to be widespread among numerous potential interviewees.

On other occasions, for example, even if I was not framed as part of the academic elite, as a researcher I was perceived as representing the Ministry of University and Research by which some RKC followers felt ignored, contested and occasionally mocked for their trust in refused knowledge.

From their perspectives, then, researchers are impostors because they contribute to supporting a power system in which institutional science serves the power and interests of the few. In many cases, this led to what researchers perceived as great hostility to them in their attempts to interview RKC members.

In my case, this was clear when I asked them to read and sign the informed consent form (Fig. 10.4).

While the interview consent form (Fig. 10.4) is a preliminary and mandatory step in interviews in order to guarantee participant data anonymity, it was often viewed with suspicion by interviewees, with several refusing to sign it. One of the reasons for this was related to the symbolic

Consenso, per l'intervistatore, all'intervista e all'uso delle informazioni date

Scelte alternative per la gestione della propria salute

Nome e Contatto del Ricercatore: **Dr. Barbara Morvello**
barbara.morvello@unipd.it

Nome e Contatto del Coordinatore Scientifico: **Prof. Federico Neresini**
federico.neresini@unipd.it

Descrizione del progetto

Il progetto (finanziato dal Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca) analizza in che modo cittadini e comunità della società italiana fanno ricorso a conoscenze alternative per affrontare problemi e prendere decisioni in merito alla loro vita, come per esempio l'uso della medicina alternativa per far fronte alla malattia. Nell'ambito di questo progetto, le conoscenze alternative comprendono quei saperi che non trovano spazio all'interno della comunità scientifica, o faticano ad essere riconosciuti come legittimi dagli esperti.

Obiettivi del progetto

Il progetto di ricerca studia l'insieme delle condizioni sociali, culturali e biografiche che orientano le persone a utilizzare conoscenze alternative alla scienza, con particolare attenzione a quelle alternative o in conflitto con la medicina convenzionale. I principali obiettivi sono:

- identificare in che modo le conoscenze alternative alla scienza vengono comunicate e condivise, sia nei media tradizionali (televisione e carta stampata), sia in quelli basati su internet (social networks, blogs, e pagine web);
- comprendere le motivazioni che guidano le persone nel riportare fiducia nelle conoscenze alternative alla scienza, specialmente quelle che hanno a che fare con la cura del corpo e il benessere della persona;
- studiare i rapporti fra la scienza e le conoscenze alternative.

Strategia

Il progetto di ricerca, attraverso focus group e interviste, coinvolge persone e comunità della società civile che, nel corso della loro vita, fanno o hanno fatto affidamento alle conoscenze alternative alla scienza. Oltre a produrre un'analisi più accurata del come questi saperi emergono, vengono legittimati e considerati affidabili, il progetto promuoverà una riflessione più ampia sulle implicazioni etiche, sociali, politiche ed economiche derivanti dalla diffusione di forme di conoscenza alternativa.

Titolo del progetto di ricerca: Scelte alternative per la gestione della propria salute

Istituzione di ricerca: Università di Padova (PD)

Nome dell'intervistatore e del curatore della raccolta: Barbara Morvello

Sono stato informato circa il progetto di ricerca e il modo in cui il mio contributo potrà essere usato. Mi è stato spiegato come la trascrizione dell'intervista, e/o l'ascolto della registrazione audio/video relativa, sarà assicurata riservata, salvo il mio assenso a renderla pubblica.

Il mio contributo sarà conservato in luogo sicuro, e ne sarà consentito l'accesso solo a coloro che ne ricevono il permesso dall'intervistatore.

Sono a conoscenza che posso ritirare il mio assenso in qualunque momento informando l'intervistatore, per cui accosento all'intervista che sto per concedere all'interno del progetto di cui sopra, intervista che potrà essere usata solo per i fini della ricerca (incluse pubblicazioni e rapporti di ricerca), e in forma strettamente anonima, dall'intervistatore*.

Firma _____ Data _____
(dell'intervistato)

Firma _____ Data _____
(dell'intervistatore-curatore)

* La riservatezza dei dati personali è comunque tutelata dal "Regolamento Generale sulla Protezione dei Dati" varato dall'Unione Europea (GDPR - 2016/679), e in ottemperanza della legislazione italiana (D.Lgs. 101/2018).

Fig. 10.4 Interview consent form

dimension of the form: the logos of the universities involved in the study, the reference to the EU's GDPR 2016/679 regarding privacy, which were considered in a few cases as 'proof' that we were imposters attempting to deceive them, because most of our interviewees no longer acknowledge delegation to the EU to protect their privacy and sensitive data. In certain cases, the phrasing of the form was framed as evidence supporting my supposed impostor role in their eyes:

A few days after the interview both S. and her husband stopped answering my phone calls.

I remained on hold. After several attempts to contact S., she finally answered. Unfortunately, she had decided that I was no longer worthy of her trust. I was hurt and frustrated. I had worked so hard for them to trust me: we had had lunch together, I had played with their daughter, they had told me about their life together and the work difficulties they were going through. They offered me apple pie and invited me to the park. S. lent me an important book: a collection of witnesses from families claiming vaccine harm. I was supposed to give it back to her when I returned to interview her husband. What went wrong? S. said that after reading the interview consent form again, they got worried. The label 'alternative knowledge' had not convinced her. (...) It is an ongoing negotiation, and I don't know what to do anymore. (Transcript of author field note, 08/04/2021)

Despite our efforts to use inclusive language mindful of the cultural and social specificities of the communities studied certain words were perceived as signs of 'impostering'—for example, as reported in the above field note, the label 'alternative knowledge' was regarded with suspicion by the interviewee, who went as far as withdrawing her consent. During discussion of this at our research team meeting we concluded that the respondents did not conceive their knowledge in terms of 'otherness', or as an 'alternative' to official knowledge, but rather as knowledge that was legitimate, *per se* but rejected or denied by the establishment, such as universities and other epistemic institutions.

This was tangible in the use of the 'no vax' label. Although other research (Francia et al., 2019) has found that 'no vax' or 'anti-vax' are the most common labels in the scientific literature to refer to communities fighting compulsory vaccination, during our interviews I noted that the

term preferred by these communities is pro-vaccine choice which they see as better emphasising the fact that they are not 'against' vaccination *per se*, but 'for' freedom of choice.

Hence, using what they consider as the wrong expressions, such as mainstream media terms (e.g. 'no vax' is frequently used in newspapers; also see Chap. 9 by Paolo Giardullo) can be framed as the language of the enemy and researchers using it are thus likely to be seen as impostors.

Moreover, the symbolic meaning that certain objects acquired as a consequence of the COVID-19 emergency played a central role in framing researchers as impostors or, at least, not worthy of trust. Face masks and vaccinations were potentially controversial objects for RKC members and crucial in defining the research setting. Thus, when these were physically present during interviews, they were often used to 'test' researchers' reliability and I soon realised that removing my face mask or not being vaccinated were 'keys' to accessing their trust. For pro-vaccine choice supporters, in fact, wearing a face mask during an interview was not perceived as a good sign: whilst some respected researchers' freedom of choice in wearing a face mask, it was still conceived as a kind of acquiescence to the 'power' of the state, a symbol of fear, rather than an individual protective device against contagion. On the other hand, removing a face mask during an interview was considered a demonstration of 'free thinking' and not being vaccinated also implied being 'one of them'.

As we have seen, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on my research action and, in few cases, I opted for online interviews on Zoom or Skype. However pro-vaccine choice supporters preferred to be interviewed in person on a great many occasions. For them an in-person meeting was not a vehicle of infection but rather the only way for them to trust researchers and reduce the risk of them being impostors: the pandemic objects thus defined the limits and potential of interaction within the interview setting. The result of this for me was constant tension between my research-related requirements and my desire to protect myself from infection. The risk of being perceived as an 'impostor' by RKC members required constant interview renegotiation. Nevertheless, I chose to conduct interviews in-person, attempting to follow social distancing rules and avoid contact with my loved ones for the rest of the week during the most difficult phases in the COVID-19 pandemic.

This negotiation process also concerned my personal values and beliefs, for example, when I introduced myself, I was often asked: ‘whose side are you on?’. This highlighted that a ‘neutral posture’ does not exist (Scott et al., 1990), even when assuming a symmetrical perspective (see Chap. 2 by Federico Neresini). To avoid the risk of being framed as an impostor, I often answered this question by explaining that my aim was to understand their views without questioning the veracity or accuracy of their claims. I always told them that my interest was understanding RKC viewpoints even if I was fully vaccinated or did not agree with them regarding the pandemic. This response did not always satisfy interviewees. In the worst case scenario it was considered a lie, since I was assumed to be hiding my opinions from them whilst on other occasions it was key to establishing a relationship of trust and avoiding being framed as an impostor.

I adopted many strategies to increase my chances of being granted interviews rather than being framed as an impostor. One of these strategies consisted of being introduced to pro-vaccine choice supporters by people who were not part of what they considered the ‘establishment’. These ‘ordinary people’—not what they regarded as corrupt academic elites (Mede & Schäfer, 2020)—were trusted work colleagues, forest-kindergarten teachers, paediatricians in favour of freedom of choice in vaccination, members of RKCs and participants in public demonstrations. Involving people with whom interviewees had established a relationship of trust as gatekeepers served to increase the likelihood of a positive reception by RKC members.

However, even if enrolling gatekeepers to acquire more information or to be accepted by research participants is very common in qualitative research, this is often omitted with the aim of providing a more linear and ‘acceptable’ version of research design (Fine, 1993). On the other hand, in order to recruit 5BLs or Alkaline Water exponents, my colleagues chose to participate in their online and offline training events and feedback was thus a long time in coming. Moreover, researchers working with Stop 5G communities took part in public demonstrations, a strategy that elicited quite a few misunderstandings, as I will report in the next section.

As regards pro-vaccine choice community members, as I discussed in Sect. 10.1, spending time with these was of use in overcoming the risk of

being considered an impostor. Having dinner, a drink or breakfast together, going for a walk or suggesting lunch was a way of gaining confidence and overcoming fears.

10.3.2 Are You Recruiting Them or Are They Recruiting You? Exploiting Researchers

Rather than being suspicious or hesitant regarding researchers' affiliations, some RKC followers attempted to make use of them. In certain cases, I observed that researchers were framed as epistemic resources belonging to established public institutions whose research authority interviewees attempted to make use of to increase acceptance of refused knowledge in the public sphere.

In such cases researchers were made use of by RKCs as 'epistemic certifiers', i.e. individuals or groups with specialised skills and knowledge used to assess the credibility or reliability of scientific knowledge claims (Collins, 2004). In fact, epistemic certifiers play a crucial role in the scientific enterprise, as they are responsible for determining which claims and evidence can be considered trustworthy. Academic researchers play an important role in the production and dissemination of expert knowledge and can be considered epistemic certifiers in the sense that they are also recognised as experts in their fields (Martin, 1991). Thus, through their expertise, researchers contribute to establishing and maintaining the standards of credibility and reliability that are necessary for scientific knowledge to be accepted and trusted (Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1986; Law, 2004). This is also true for RKCs when they attempt to exploit researchers' ability to foster the acknowledgement of refused knowledge claims in the public sphere.

I will now reflexively reconstruct the various ways by which certain RKC members attempted to make use of researchers as epistemic certifiers. Considering pro-vaccine choice RKCs, for example, I noted occasional attempts to access researchers' networks—i.e. gain access to a possible audience by leveraging a researcher's reputation. An example is what happened to me with a pro-vaccine choice doctor who was initially willing to be interviewed but then asked me to promote the contents of

the interview within my academic network and share the contents of the interview with colleagues to find sympathisers, as I reported in my memos:

Following a telephone contact with G., a doctor, he asked if I could promote the content of the interview through my network of academic contacts. I was surprised. This aspect is very interesting for me as it denotes the need for credibility even within academic networks. Looking for credibility among academics can be interpreted as a desire to position themselves within spheres with the potential to increase follower numbers with the interview being used as an entry-point and my academic degree and affiliation as a form of legitimacy. I had to explain to him that the interview would remain anonymous and would not be releasable. He seemed a bit disappointed with this. (Transcript of my field notes, 07/03/2021)

This is important for the RKC, as their knowledge claims compete with scientific knowledge, often through various mimesis strategies (see Chap. 2 by Federico Neresini). In this context, making use of researchers is central to legitimising claims in the public sphere. In addition, mobilising those perceived to be ‘independent scientific experts’ (e.g. not colluding with the scientific, political and economic establishment) is a common RKC strategy designed to increase the credibility of their claims (Crabu et al., 2022). In fact, they strive to exploit not only the researcher’s networks but also their credentials.

Indeed, attempting to take advantage of an interviewer’s credentials—such as academic qualifications and affiliations—is a specific strategy employed by certain RKC members to improve their authority and legitimacy within their communities. This is particularly true for the Alkaline Water RKC that mainly comprises sellers of devices serving to alkalize water and representatives of specific brands. For these, an interview is an opportunity to gain credibility amongst the alkaline water community’s members. There is nothing new about researchers being seen as epistemic certifiers or certain respondents attempting to exploit their network and/or their professional credentials, as similar credibility attribution methods have been used in various scientific or alleged scientific knowledge forums (Collins & Pinch, 1979; Collins, 1998). The difference lies in the things the above cases showed researchers were ‘asked’—providing

contacts or spreading messages among professional networks and this complicate the interaction with RKC.

In other cases, RKC engaged in efforts to ‘recruit’ researchers, during interviews and also afterwards:

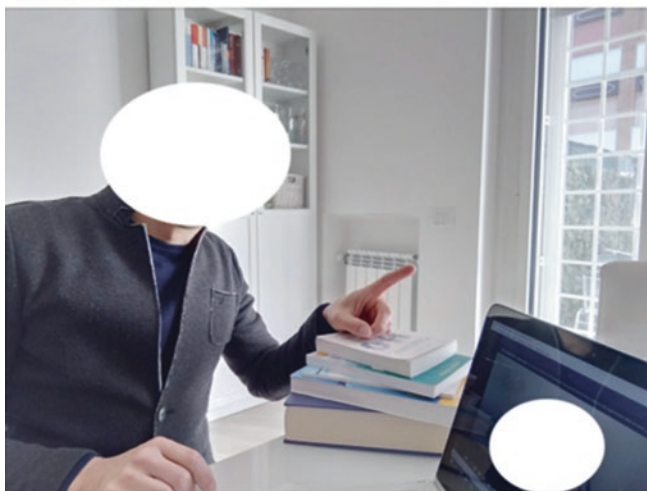
Our problem during fieldwork was that they wanted to ‘recruit us’! They wanted to legitimise their knowledge through our research, and this ambiguity was difficult to manage. Because the first thing we do is try to be accepted by interviewees ... but actually they are so happy to give us information, they are very accommodating with researchers. We were very careful not to be recruited, but ambiguity regarding this was difficult to avoid. During interviews, they would then share the news on Facebook, for example. (...) They also used, or tried to use, our institutional scientific credentials to legitimise their knowledge. So, many times we risked becoming ‘tools’ for their ‘patchworks of knowledge’. And this was something we had to bear in mind not to avoid building relationships with them, but to avoid being recruited or used to support their refused knowledge. This was a crucial point. (Transcript of researcher interview, 22/06/2022)

The risk of being recruited as an epistemic certifier was difficult to avoid in certain situations, because building a relationship of trust with interviewees was important to the success of the interview (Kuehner, 2016) and we thus attempted to be always open to such requests. This was difficult to achieve on various occasions, however, because RKC often use social media pages such as Facebook to promote events, activities and news (Bory et al., 2021, 2023) and this also involved meeting with researchers. On a couple of occasions followers of Alkaline Water RKC members created online posts and shared these among their online communities, with interviews being presented as personal successes for respondents, as well as important achievements for the community, as the post below makes clear:

(Text from the post above—Fig. 10.5) One way or another, it’s back to university!!!

Giving my contribution to a Federico II University of Naples Research project on Ionized Alkaline Water in Lifestyles, Health, and Wellness was an honour. Over three years, we have helped hundreds and hundreds of

In un modo o in un altro si torna all'Università! 🗨️ 🙏 🙏
 Dare il mio contributo in una Ricerca dell'Università Federico II di Napoli in merito all'Acqua Alcalina Ionizzata negli stili di vita, Salute e Benessere è stato un onore.
 In 3 anni abbiamo aiutato centinaia e centinaia di famiglie... e nel 2021 abbiamo iniziato ancora meglio!! Abbiamo già cambiato l'abitudine di molti.
 Sempre grazie a Dio 🙏



👍❤️ 134

Commenti: 57 Condivisioni: 4

Fig. 10.5 A member of the Alkaline Water community, sharing a picture taken during a Zoom interview, FB page, 01/04/2021

families ... and 2021 has got off to an even better start!!! We have already changed the habits of many. Thank God always! (Quotation from a post on an Alkaline Water FB page, 01/04/2021)

The post was also accompanied by featured personal images (Fig. 10.5) in which users portray themselves as worthy of trust on the basis of interviews by academic researchers. Gaining public recognition for RKCs thus also involves recruiting epistemic certifiers belonging to established scientific institutions.

Other recruitment attempts, specifically reported by researchers dealing with No-5G RKC, involve efforts to turn researchers into activists.

On certain occasions, interest in RKC claims shown by researchers was assumed to be somehow a tacit request to become part of their social world. As other studies have also reported (Harambam, 2020a), the risk in adopting an agnostic perspective is that researchers can be portrayed as lending support to such causes from mainstream media or academics. In our case, specifically with people fighting to block the installation of 5G antennas, researchers took part in public demonstrations to meet privileged witnesses for interviews and this created quite a few misunderstandings with respondents, as one researcher reports:

When they try to convince researchers of the validity of their scientific positioning, you get used to it and play along. But once I felt guilty. It happened when I saw an interviewee during a demonstration against 5G and another time also with a very nice lady who was involved in the Italian '68 movement. They talked to me about young people's lack of interest in health-related issues, and so saw my interest as a researcher in the 5G topic as notable. I had the feeling that it was an opportunity for them to recruit me, as a potential young 'Stop 5G' activist! I felt almost guilty about that because that was not my intention. I never said to them that I was interested in becoming an activist! I always said that I was a researcher exploring the Stop 5G issue, but I never said that I wanted to become an activist! But still, they interpreted my interest in the topic and our meetings as an opportunity to recruit me (as an activist). (Transcript of researcher interview, 14/06/2022)

As the researcher reported, meetings with members of the Stop-5G RKC were often turned into recruiting opportunities for the latter in which researchers were viewed as allies, as epistemic resources via which to strengthen the RKC. However, some of those interviewing experts on the 5BLs had other views:

The experts (members of 5BLs communities) probably wanted to exploit our interviews as a form of legitimisation of their positions or at least as an 'alternative amplifier' to overcome a series of situations in which they failed, for example, with the media. Indeed, they often claimed that the public debate and the media demolished them or were very critical of them. (Transcript of researcher interview, 12/07/2022)

As with the Alkaline Water RKC, 5BLs experts use interviews to spread their message and researchers as epistemic resources with which to legitimise their claims, often after unsuccessful earlier attempts to spread their message within the mainstream media. They frequently felt betrayed, and occasionally ridiculed, by journalists and public opinion, as we have seen. In the above case, 5BL followers also viewed interviews with researchers as opportunities to enhance and refresh their reputation in the public sphere.

10.4 Conclusion

As Fine (1993) noted, frequently in qualitative research the process of conducting fieldwork remains hidden in the backstage of social research. Analysis is private research group activity and thus field notes and other related materials collected and produced by researchers are rarely available. This makes the role of our biographies and social positions as researchers implicated in the act of exploring and understanding even more opaque (Geertz, 1968, 1973; Back, 2004). But what happens if we restore the epistemic value of data collection as a complex and non-linear process of negotiation with research participants? What is to be gained by reflexively analysing researchers' fieldwork experiences?

In my case, it would seem to increase our understanding of the concerns and motivations that drive people to dispute and distrust scientific institutions. As Latour and Woolgar (1986) showed in *Laboratory Life*, exploring and reporting the means by which observers are conceived, addressed and occasionally even labelled by research participants reveals important aspects of scientists' culture and epistemic assumptions. Similarly, observing how researchers were framed by RKC members was of use in understanding the implications and practices of refused knowledge legitimisation as well as casting light on the ambiguity of this process. For example, it is clear that, on one hand, researchers were sometimes viewed as 'impostors' and, thus interviews rejected whilst on the other hand, the opposite can also occur with researchers being framed as 'epistemic certifiers' and thus subjected to more or less overt attempts at exploitation or recruitment by RKC members.

Reflexively considering that researchers are framed as ‘impostors’ or ‘epistemic certifiers’ reveals the way that RKC’s often demonstrate a great appreciation of science which takes the form of idealised science that is not personified by us as institutional scientific spokespeople. By contrast, when RKC’s attempt to enrol us as ‘epistemic certifiers’ or activists it implies that they are often and sometimes reluctantly considering science and its institutions as a valid resource in their effort to legitimise their knowledge claims.

Thus, reflecting on how the researchers experienced the fieldwork was an important way of examining RKC’s ambivalent relationship with mainstream epistemic authority in greater depth. Moreover, reflecting on the relationship between researchers and participants also throws light on the way that some of the legitimisation processes pursued by RKC’s can be somewhat similar to those in action within the scientific research community. For example, the alignment of actors in order to reinforce the epistemic authority of claims and the use of epistemic certifiers to establish reliability also play a fundamental role in science.

Our reflexive exercise also highlighted that establishing a high-quality relationship with RKC’s was a matter of spending time with them, keeping up-to-date about their theories and the reasons underlying their claims, being aware of the contextual elements potentially affecting our relationship with them, such as COVID-19 policies, and thus, overcoming the binary ‘science’-‘conspiracy theory’ dichotomy (Safford et al., 2021). In challenging or exploiting epistemic authority, RKC’s are not simply interested in avoiding sanctions or the consequences of not adhering to certain social norms and public health policies nor in irrationally pursuing theories spawned from online misinformation, but rather in legitimising refused knowledge in the public sphere with the aim of gaining supremacy in certain epistemic battles—such as the ‘Corona Truth War’ (Harambam, 2020b), the vaccinations controversy and the installation of 5G antennas—and being acknowledged as having the legitimacy to contest them in light of the refused knowledge they produce, promote and support.

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