

The Role of Gatekeepers in Research: Learning from Reflexivity and Reflection

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Abstract—Research is now an integral part of everyday health, education and social science practice. These professions need to be responsive to meet the changing needs in light of evidence based research findings. Within this process, gatekeepers have a key role to ensure researchers gain access to potential participants and sites for research. Positive influences of the gatekeepers can be invaluable to the research process by facilitating the smooth running of research activity to completion. At times, gatekeeping can be problematic with researchers having limited or no access to sites. In this present study to recruit vulnerable adolescents, a number of gatekeepers denied, limited or delayed access to potential participants and sites despite ethical, professional and organizational approval. In response, the researchers incorporated learning tools to address challenges brought about by gatekeepers in this study and for improvements in future studies. Reflexivity was used during the study to critically review all aspects of the research process and retrospective reflection identified areas that worked well and those areas for improvement in future studies. In broad terms, a number of factors were found to influence the action of gatekeepers. This related to level of understanding about the research, communication issues, motivation issues and fear or anxiety about the outcome. One recurring issue seemed to relate to the sensitive nature of the study and the deeply held attitudes and values of the individual gatekeepers. Researchers need to engage and involve the gatekeeper/s early in the research process. Other positive influences include sharing of clear information with the purpose of the research, the gatekeeper being motivated with a positive attitude to research which is also supported within the gatekeeper's environment. When these positive influences are not present then this can have a negative influence on research activity.

Keywords- engaging adolescents; young people; gatekeepers; reflexivity; reflection; access to participants; accessing research sites; moral panic; research challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gatekeeping is a common phenomenon in health, education and social research studies. It is a complex ongoing process that has a powerful impact on the extent to which a research study is successful. Gatekeeping is described as:

‘A term referring to the adult who controls or limits researcher’s access to participants. For example, the top manager or senior executive in an organization, or the person within a group or community who makes the final decision as to whether to allow the researcher access to undertake the research [1].’

‘Gatekeepers are individuals who have the power or influence to grant or refuse access to a field or research setting [2].’

‘The person involved in the process to allow or deny another access to someone or something [3].’

Research studies are normally planned to take account of the sensitive nature of the enquiry, the vulnerability of the participants and access to the research environment via the gatekeepers [4]. Developing the research involves incorporating strategies within the proposal to protect the key ethical principles for studies involving human subjects [5]. Research ethics approval is required for study proposals with additional approval granted from relevant other health, education and social services. It is assumed that studies are able to commence once ethical approval has been granted and agreed access to the research environment and participants has been confirmed. At times, the gatekeeping process can present the researcher with new challenges. Even when it is not possible to conduct research because of the gatekeeping process, there is still an important opportunity for learning about gatekeeping through reflexivity and reflection.

Reflexivity is proactive process involving the researcher being aware of their effect on the research process, relationships and outcomes of the research [6]. Reflexivity is a term used in research methodology to refer to a reflectiveness among researchers about the implications for the knowledge of the social world they generate, of their methods, values, biases, decisions, and mere presence in the very situations they investigate [6]. All prejudices and assumptions influencing how we act in the world can impede rather than facilitate the research process. These influencing factors can have far reaching consequences for the research [7].

Reflection is a retrospective analysis of action and events related to improving future research. It has been defined as being an active process which should result in learning, changing behaviors and practices [7]. Ideally, the processes of reflexive analysis and reflection should be an integrated component of the research study from the beginning [8].

Gatekeepers in research can influence the research progress and access to participants based on their assumptions and preconceptions about the implications of the research. Understanding the position, perspective, beliefs and values of the gatekeeper is an important issue in research where the research is sensitive or the participants are vulnerable.

The researchers have encountered this ‘gatekeeping’ phenomenon in a range of studies involving populations deemed to be at a higher ethical risk. Research including children and young people in unequal and dependent relationships, sensitive topics, adverse lifestyles such as homelessness, sexual activities or abuse and violence are known to be within this group [3]. These studies which were challenging to progress, had the common factor of being controlled by the appointed gatekeepers. This phenomenon was further evidenced in a recent study to engage vulnerable adolescents in the research process (funded by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde). As the phenomenon emerged within this study, it prompted the researchers to incorporate the processes of reflexivity and reflection as learning tools to review and address the challenges faced and how these can be ameliorated.

This purpose of this paper is to share this learning experience with other researchers and practitioners for them to recognize the common challenges associated with the role of the gatekeeper in health, education and social science research. It will provide an insight into the important role of the gatekeeper in supporting or obstructing access to participants and research sites. It will also explore how these factors can influence the research process and ways in which the challenges may be mitigated by including the gatekeepers as an integral part of the research process.

I. BACKGROUND

Over recent decades much has been written about the role of gatekeepers in the research process. There is no doubt that gatekeeping serves a specific and deliberate function within research. The gatekeeper also has responsibilities and needs to ensure that people within their institution or organization remain protected and free from coercion at all times and this relates to invasive techniques and exploitation [6]. In healthcare environments, responsibilities may include protecting and safeguarding children and others such as patients or their families and professionals themselves. In fairness, the gatekeeper may also be concerned about researchers themselves not being scrupulous in adhering to ethical principles. In this respect, the gatekeeper has some

power and control and responsibility to protect potential participants [4].

Accessing research sites and participants has continued to challenge fieldworkers for many decades. At times this may be inappropriately portrayed as being unproblematic in research studies [10]. However there is evidence to suggest that the gatekeeping process has negatively influenced research studies in several ways [11]. These include limiting the conditions for access to participants, limiting access to data and to respondents, restricting the scope of analysis and by retaining prerogatives with respect to dissemination strategies [11]. Potential gatekeepers also interpret what they are asked or expected to do in their own social context [9].

In relation to research involving children, ethics committees and different levels of gatekeepers may stipulate so many safeguards that researchers abandon their attempts to access children in favor of their parents and carers [12,13]. This is disheartening especially when it is the children’s voices and viewpoints that are needed to answer the research questions [14]. Moreover some researchers feel disheartened from negative experiences that they are discouraged from including children in future projects [15,16].

All research needs careful advanced planning [4]. Initially the researcher must identify the key gatekeepers concerned and focus attention on gaining their support and cooperation [4]. This may include gatekeepers at different levels in the organisation or institution who may also identify other gatekeepers at a practical level. Fig. 1 provides key factors involved in the planning and conduct of any research process through to successful completion and dissemination within the timescale.

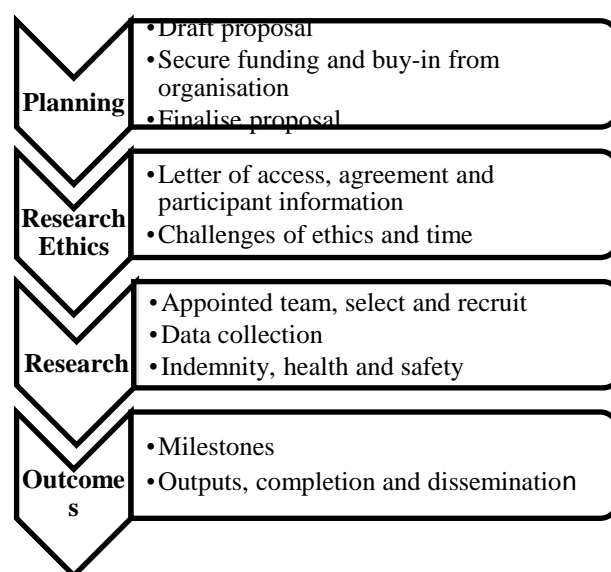


Figure 1. Planning for the research

II. THE PROCESS OF REFLEXIVITY AND REFLECTION

The process of reflexivity was actively incorporated into the study ‘to engage vulnerable adolescents in research’ (commissioned by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, a large regional health board in the west of Scotland). It became evident early on in the study that a number of gatekeepers had refused access to premises despite having previously signed access letters for the ethical approval process. This caused a dilemma for the researchers which was addressed to some extent through the process of reflexivity. This involved the researchers being proactive, anticipating challenges and evaluating the research process, methods and decisions. This was necessary to understand and gain insight into the reasons for the actions taken by the gatekeepers whilst still progressing the study. This was achieved in several ways with qualitative data categorised and interpreted using a logical approach for data analysis:

- Follow-up contact with gatekeepers to explore their reasons why they had facilitated access or denied access.
- Review of available literature about ‘gatekeepers in research’ to gain further insight in light of current qualitative findings.
- Retrospective reflection on the process to review and consideration of discussions at research team meetings, evidence from documentation (e.g. progress reports) and the researcher’s reflective diary.

Model of reflection

The reflective process involved using a model of reflection as a critical lens to retrospectively scrutinise the research study [17]. This involved planning, developing and conducting the study, communication, and interactions with individuals and groups. Table 1 summarises the reflection processes.

TABLE I. REFLECTION PROCESSES

<p>Reflection Processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep an open mind and be critical • View from various perspectives • What, why, and how things were done? • What worked well and why did this work well? • What did not work well and why not? • What, why and how else could things be done? • Compare and contrast • Consider consequences • Seek, identify and resolve • What was learned? <p>A key component is self evaluation of skills, knowledge and attributes for personal development purposes.</p>

Figure 2 presents a summary of the potential implications for the research process depending on whether the gatekeepers allow access or do not allow access to sites and participants.

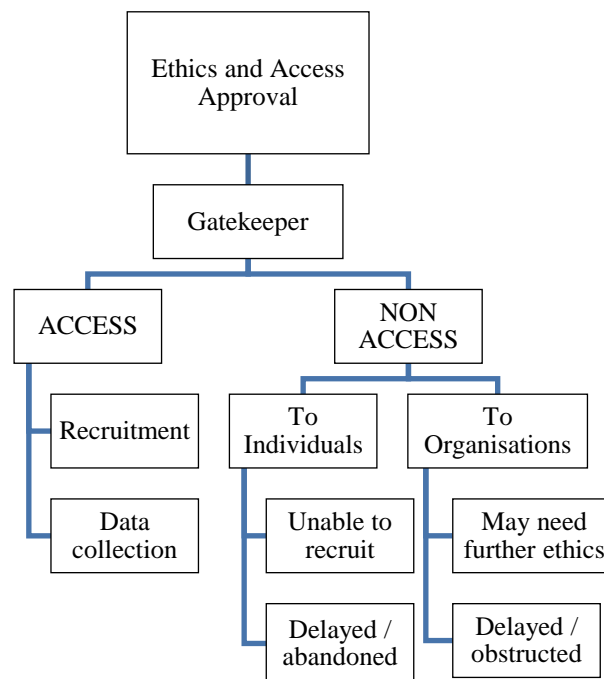


Figure 2. ‘Access’ or ‘non access’ to participants or sites.

A total of 52 participants (vulnerable adolescents) were recruited and completed the study despite initial and ongoing challenges related to gaining access through the gatekeepers. This was possible through incorporating contingency plans for recruitment due to the reflexive process integrated within the ongoing monitoring of the study revealing these challenges and threatening the success of the study.

Follow-up contact with the gatekeepers was not always possible. However a number of gatekeepers did engage with the researcher and were willing to discuss the reasons for their actions. Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data was conducted on the documentation (research progress notes and reflective diary). Applying the model of reflection, the researchers retrospectively reviewed and reflected on all aspects of the research, the interactions between representatives at the research meetings and actions points produced. This was informative and provided further insight into the planning of fieldwork for research, the role of the gatekeeper and how this could influence the research process.

Two dominant themes were evident through the data analysis and these were termed ‘Access’ and ‘Non Access’, which referred to situations where access was readily available (Access) or where access was denied or limited (Non Access). Table 2 summarises the two themes and the related emerging categories within the themes.

TABLE 2. THEMES ‘ACCESS’ AND ‘NON ACCESS’

Themes	
ACCESS	NON ACCESS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivated for evidence based practice • Interested and positive for research • Knew about the study • Positive attitude 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumed the adolescents did not want to participate • Assumed the unit did not want to participate • Lack of understanding of research • Unsure about the purpose • Poor communication • Inconvenient • Negative environment

When the gatekeepers denied or limited access to participants or sites then there were common reasons reported. A number of gatekeepers believed that the adolescents in their environments would not want to be involved in the study or they did not see the need for the study.

‘They (adolescent girls) will not want to take part in this study. It is not something they will be interested in..... there is always something and these girls have enough problems to be bothered with.No I don’t think we want to be part of this study... what ever it is.’

It was clear from the findings that there could be different levels of gatekeepers in the units. The reasons for obstructing access were often reported to be due to communication issues between staff members on the research sites. For example if a different member of staff was on shift and was unaware of or misinformed about the impending study. This often resulted in access being denied despite having previously been agreed by the research site manager.

‘I am not sure about this. I did not know about it. Was it one of the seniors who agreed to this?’

Other gatekeepers reported being well informed about the study. They were positive and keen to engage and cooperate with the researcher to recruit participants.

‘It sounded an interesting study it is no problem to get girls here. I hope it helps them.....’

The retrospective reflective process enabled the researchers to look back on the study through every stage from planning through to completion. It also provided opportunity to look back on the interaction, discussions and communication with related group members and organizations. This reflection process was a learning tool for the researchers to find out where improvements can be made for future studies of this nature.

The reflective process for this present study also prompted the researchers to reflect back on other studies where the gatekeeper did not permit or delayed access to sites and potential participants. This was despite the studies being granted ethics approval and access to research sites and potential participants obtained. When reflecting on these studies it was clear that the terms ‘non access’ and ‘access’ with associated factors were common to all studies.

- i. A study involving sex education in secondary schools, refused the researcher access to adolescent children by individual teachers. This was despite the Director of Education granting access. The contingency plan was to omit these schools and invite other schools in the area to participate (over 700 secondary students were subsequently recruited).
- ii. In a funded RCT in primary care, the practice manager inappropriately reallocated participants to groups. She thought that the control group would be more suitable for this ‘type of participant’ than the intervention group the participants had been randomly assigned to. This action contaminated the rigour of this RCT.
- iii. In a funded study of health workforce, the gatekeeper continually put restrictions on the data collection processes. This involved prolonged delays for suitable dates to conduct the data collection. The gatekeeper was from the funding institution and to date this study remains incomplete.

III. DISCUSSION

Gatekeepers are in control of access to research sites and the potential participants. Gatekeeping as part of a research project is an important role and is crucial for success. It is a complex ongoing process requiring a clear understanding of the role, strong interpersonal skills, a sound understanding of ethical principles and knowledge of who can be approached for advice and when to do so. The process needs to be considered from the perspectives of both the researchers and the gatekeepers. This was evident within the current findings which will now be integrated within similar findings in existing literature.

At times, researchers are faced with challenges when access is obstructed which can then seriously threaten the progress of the study. This can occur despite having approval and access obtained for studies through formal routes. The

challenges to the researchers can come from different levels of access i.e institutional, group and individual levels.

Gatekeepers: Non-access to participants

Ethical and project approval by official gatekeepers does not guarantee cooperation from informal gatekeepers and participants [18]. Gatekeepers grant formal access but may withhold cooperation which can also be obstructive. Fig. 3 presents factors that may influence non or limited access to participants.

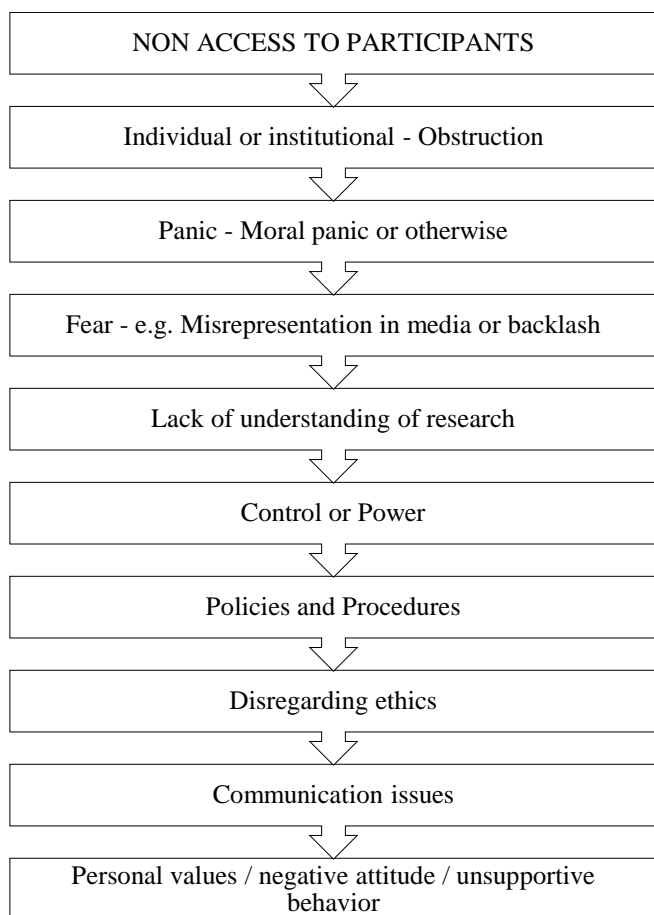


Figure 3. Non access to participants (denied, limited or obstructed).

In situations where there is ‘non access’ then the gatekeeper can unintentionally or intentionally delay or block research [14]. The gatekeeper may have personal or organizational reasons for this. The process may involve several levels of gatekeepers including formal and informal gatekeepers. The researcher needs to be aware of the different gatekeepers who may be involved in some capacity within the planned study.

Challenges may be created by the gatekeepers to avoid ‘moral panic’. The concept of moral panic relates to the individual’s deeply held attitudes and values having origins and consequences in the real world which can be both

positive and negative [19]. This is a sociological term describing situations including anxieties and panic arising when a real phenomenon is blown way out of proportion, or when a phenomenon is believed to be real when it is not. For example, the gatekeeper may experience fear or anxiety of backlash from the media about sensitive findings and misrepresentation of the findings. The latest research in this field of health includes themes such as sex panics, media panics, and moral panics over children and youth [20].

In the situation where the research is conducted within the gatekeeper’s workplace there is the possibility that the dissemination of the research findings may cause criticism or embarrassment for the gatekeeper’s organization [3]. This can put the gatekeepers in a compromising position within their work environment and with their employers. In extreme cases, this may result in conduct issues or dismissal for the gatekeeper [3].

Environments and individuals are not always supportive of research with little awareness of the purpose for research or the benefits that any findings may bring. There may be misinterpretation of the study with little regard or awareness for ethical processes and approval which can result in suspicion about the integrity of the study. This may also relate to a sense of protection for the institution and the participants. Often this protection is taken too far and with no thought or regards for the individuals’ right to participate in research as required. The gatekeeper role is also a position of power, control and with responsibility. This role may be taken to the extreme resulting in varying degrees of abuse of the role and misuse of power and control. The gatekeeper with poor communication or interpersonal skills can negatively impact on the appropriate implementation of the role.

Key issues for researchers include involving the gatekeeper/s at the planning stage [10]. This includes how recruitment is planned and how the research will be conducted, practical issues and the sharing of information with the gatekeepers to establish strategies to promote and maintain credibility and trust. Access needs not only approval but also cooperation [4].

The researchers may resolve these challenges by using a contingency plan or it may not be possible to overcome the challenges resulting in the study being limited or abandoned.

Gatekeepers: Access to participants

Fig. 4 presents the factors that influence and facilitate access to participants through the gatekeeper.

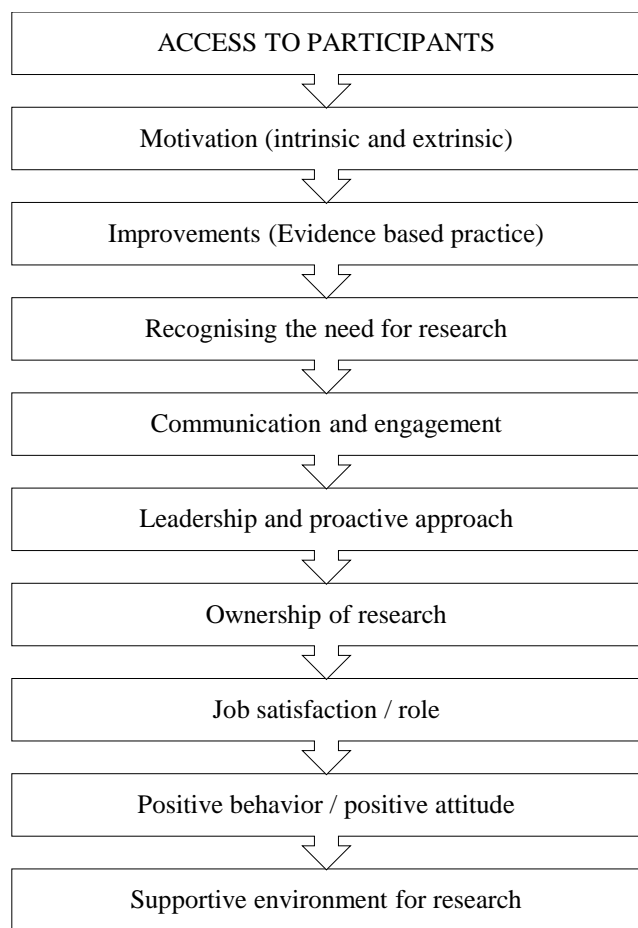


Figure 4. Access participants with influencing factors.

The role of the gatekeeper is often influenced by a variety of potential factors. Motivation plays a key role. Intrinsic motivation is a powerful tool in stimulating individuals to engage especially if there is a sense of achievement, personal satisfaction and ownership in the process [21]. Extrinsic factors relate to a supportive working environment for research. Being involved in the research process, awareness of the need for research and gaining recognition from research team and participants all contribute to positive attitudes and behaviors. Other factors include forward thinking individuals with leadership and effective communications skills.

IV. CONCLUSION

Researchers need to involve the gatekeepers in advance planning for the study. This can be beneficial as it engages the gatekeeper early in the process and keeps them informed of plans for the study.

This early engagement may also clarify the purpose of the study for the gatekeepers. It will be helpful in relation to alleviating any of their concerns and anxieties and provide an opportunity for reassurance about the study and any implications from the findings for either themselves or their organization. It would also be helpful for the researchers to

consider any suggestions the gatekeeper may have to improve the recruitment process.

It is important for researchers to be sensitive to the gatekeeper's position. They need to be kept well informed with clear understanding of what is required of them and their important contribution to the study. This involvement will also gain their trust and convince them of the integrity of the study and the competence of the researchers.

This role is crucial to the success of research studies so it is vital that the sufficient time and energy is devoted to this process. This should include building in time to question and critically reflect on the gatekeeper's role. One focus must be on making sure all potential participants are given equal opportunities of being involved in the research process.

Reflexivity is a useful proactive learning process for researchers to incorporate throughout studies from conception, planning through to completion. Retrospective reflection helps the researcher to look back on the completed study and use the learning to inform future studies. This model of reflection is an excellent process for researchers to acknowledge where improvements could be made and celebrate any areas of good practice.

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