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From a distance: researching across jurisdictions in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the challenges of negotiating access to research participants at a distance. These challenges are explored in the context of a study of destinations and outcomes for 24 young people permanently excluded from special schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in England. The authors describe the process of negotiating access through a third party to young people considered to be particularly vulnerable, from whom written opt-in consent was negotiated through an intermediary. This process necessitated establishing trust with a wide range of service providers, usually over the telephone. Moreover, these service providers were gatekeepers *and* informants to the research. They were located at different points in a variety of professional hierarchies with different accountability structures. There was considerable variation in the extent to which the individuals themselves were prepared to exercise trust, defined here as both cognitive and behavioural. The responses of these individuals were contingent and unpredictable. The research team negotiated this uncertain territory as insiders with knowledge and experience of alternative provision, and as outsiders by virtue of their location in another jurisdiction of the UK.

INTRODUCTION

This paper tells the story of a research project funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in England and conducted by a team of researchers based in Scotland. The challenges of conducting research at a distance are explored alongside the opportunities that carrying out fieldwork in a different jurisdiction of the UK presents. We believe that these findings will be of particular interest and relevance at a time of financial constraint, when researchers are competing for funding across the 'home countries' (Corbyn 2009).

From the outset it is important to be clear about what we mean by 'at a distance'. In this paper we are talking specifically about geographical distance and not about what might be described as 'social' distance (e.g. differences in class and gender between the members of the research team and the research 'subjects'). Whilst some of the observations we make may also apply to other understandings of distance, we are not making those arguments here. The article is not about online or eResearch, an area of enquiry upon which a substantial body of literature is developing (e.g., Anderson & Kamuka 2003;

Appelbe & Bannon 2008; Comley 2008; Murthy 2008). Although much of the preparatory work was done by email and telephone, most of the fieldwork involved face-to-face interviews with young people, their parents/carers and a wide range of service providers. We faced similar challenges to the ones experienced by those conducting research online, for example in relation to establishing identity without direct personal contact, but we did eventually meet the respondents.

In this paper we want to focus on two issues that emerged as the project progressed: namely, the challenges of establishing trust and negotiating access; and the opportunities presented by occupying a complex 'insider/outsider' status. These are explored in the context of a brief discussion of research ethics in social science, including established protocols for negotiating access.

It is important to state at the outset that these challenges are not unique to research conducted across different parts of the UK. All researchers have to consider how to establish their credibility and trustworthiness, irrespective of the locus of the fieldwork in relation to the 'home' base of the research team. This article tells the story of a particular research project, in terms that we hope will engage a broad readership. We make no claims to the generalisability of these findings, as the particulars of this project and the individual biographies of the researchers played a significant role in shaping how the research evolved. However we do believe this account is illuminative, in that it sheds some light on the day-to-day reality of the research process and will therefore have relevance for others embarking on similar projects.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The research project, a study of routes, destinations and outcomes for a group of pupils (24) permanently excluded from special schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) was commissioned in the autumn of 2006 in the light of concerns expressed in the report of the Practitioners' Group on School Behaviour and Discipline [The Steer Report]. These related to the quality of educational provision for young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) (DfES 2005: 9). As is the case with most commissioned research, the objectives were given at the outset, although there was some scope for negotiation and development as the project progressed. A full account of the research design and some of the methodological challenges encountered can be found elsewhere (Pirrie and Macleod, 2009a; Pirrie and Macleod, 2009b). Here we give only a very brief overview of the study in order to provide some context for the rest of the paper.

The research comprised two main strands. The first was a survey of all PRUs and special schools in the 65 Local Authorities in England in which the study was being conducted. The purpose of this exercise was to identify a group of young people who had been permanently excluded during the reference period (i.e. the 2005-06 school year). An outline sample of 56 young people who met the criteria for inclusion in the study was identified from the returns submitted to a short questionnaire sent to all the special schools (634) and PRUs (193) listed on a database provided to the research team by the DCSF. The final study

sample comprised 24 young people, from whom written opt-in consent was received prior to the commencement of the second strand of the research. This involved interviews with the 24 young people, members of their families and service providers. Over the course of the three-year project (2006-2009) around 125 interviews were conducted.

Access to the young people and their families was negotiated in accordance with established guidelines for the conduct of social research in general (SRA 2003) and educational research in particular (BERA 2004; SERA 2005). Access to the young people was negotiated through a third party, usually the young person's 'key worker', the identity of whom was ascertained through contact with the named officer with responsibility for Education Other than at School (EOTAS) in each of the 65 local authorities. In order to maintain the anonymity of the young people, the third parties who negotiated access were requested not to disclose the young person's identity until written opt-in consent had been received.

NEGOTIATING ACCESS AND ESTABLISHING TRUST

There has been much written on the subject of gatekeepers to research sites and on negotiating access to research participants (e.g., Gronning 1997; Sixsmith *et al.* 2003; Emmel *et al.* 2007). The notion of a gate that has to be staffed implies that those to whom the gate provides access are in some way vulnerable and/or dangerous. In this project we used gatekeepers such as headteachers, social workers, Youth Offending Team workers and Connexions Personal Advisors in order to gain access to young people. However, in the case of the study considered here, the gatekeepers were also key informants. Not only did we want to speak to young people and their families, but we also wanted to speak with the gatekeepers and to other service providers, in order to ascertain their perspectives on the issue of destinations and outcomes for young people permanently excluded from special schools and PRUs.

The process of identifying such the relevant key worker for each recorded case' – we did not have names at this stage – has been reported elsewhere, and the implications for the further conduct of the research explored in some detail (Pirrie and Macleod 2009a). In this paper, we take up the story from the point at which a key worker, or gatekeeper to the young person was identified. Telephone calls were made to establish contact, and to discuss the appropriateness of inviting the young person to participate in the study. We were mindful during the inception phase and indeed throughout the research project that we were dealing with young people who were considered to be particularly vulnerable. We ensured at all times that we acted in accordance with ethical guidelines in relation to this group (SERA 2005). That is to say, we ensured that all parties were fully informed about the purposes and conduct of the research; and that they reserved the right to withdraw from the project without explanation at any time. All but one of the young people involved in the study had the intellectual capability to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. In the case of the young person who was not capable of

giving informed consent, the mother gave written opt-in consent for her son's participation.

During the inception phase our main concern was to establish our trustworthiness over the telephone with people whom we had never met. There is some literature on the telephone interview as a research method (Taylor 2002; Dinham 1994; Dicker & Gilbert 1988). However, much of the existing literature concerns the use of telephone interviews as a method for conducting surveys rather than more open interviews (e.g. Robson 2002). The use of the telephone for survey research may well be a mark of the origins of this method in market research and its use in political polling (Taylor 2002). Interviews conducted by telephone have clear advantages in terms of cost and time. The most frequently cited challenge of this method is the need to establish rapport with the interviewee (Robson 2002). Dinham (1994) reports how he would mention early on in his interviews with teachers who had resigned that he was an ex-teacher, something that he believes led to 'breaking the ice' and 'establishing a measure of common ground and openness' (p. 22). Although Dinham is talking about the rapport once the interview had started, the same issue applies to the stage before, namely negotiating access.

From the outset, we were aware that in this study 'establishing rapport' was potentially going to present some challenges for which we had to be prepared. First, our status as researchers rather than practitioners might work against us. Second, the study was being conducted for the DCSF and hence, despite the usual assurances of anonymity, respondents might think that their performance in a politically sensitive area such as exclusion from school was being subjected to public scrutiny. Finally, the fact that all but one of the researchers were located in Scotland could mark us as outsiders. At the beginning of the project we were unsure as to how these various factors might influence its course. What surprised us was the range of responses we received to our initial telephone calls; from a completely trusting, 'no questions asked' approach to a few cases where we were never able to establish our credibility and to get to the point of negotiating access to the young people concerned, *let alone* conducting interviews. Also we found that different keys opened different doors, and that it was not always easy to predict which key would work in which particular door. The main themes in the range of responses from these preliminary contacts can be summarised as follows. The examples given are drawn from research diary notes and emails¹³. The most responsive interviewees were those who were willing to proceed even before we were able to provide further information or confirm our identity as *bone fide* researchers conducting a government-funded project. The head of an outreach team told the researcher that '*yes, that's absolutely fine. I can give you the telephone number of another centre where one of our other lads is placed*'. Other respondents were equally co-operative after they had perused the leaflets designed to inform prospective informants of the nature and purpose of the research; and were satisfied that there were sufficient resources within the resource team to

¹³ The names of all young people, professionals and schools/ services have been changed in order to maintain anonymity and respect confidentiality.

conduct the research effectively (e.g. to communicate effectively with a young person with a hearing impairment). It became clear as the inception phase progressed that we were dealing with individuals at different points in professional hierarchies. This meant that in some instances respondents wanted to check with a line manager (or in one instance with a legal advisor) before disclosing information that would enable us to identify a particular young person whom we would then approach through an intermediary for written opt-in consent.

We encountered a few examples of respondents who were very reluctant to give any information at all, or even to say whether they had any knowledge of the young person under discussion. The following extract from one of the researcher's diary illustrates this type of response:

I spoke with [Martin, Special Educational Needs (SEN) Caseworker] - really cagey - wouldn't even confirm that he had a kid of that name on his books - said I'd email info leaflets etc but not holding my breath.

What is interesting about this final example is that another young person had been identified in the same local authority. He had had a different SEN caseworker, Diane, who shared an office with Martin. When we called Diane about her case she looked up the database and confirmed the young person in question was 'on her books' and offered to help us in any way that she could. The difference between Diane and Martin seems to be an example of a phenomenon that we encountered many times during the whole project: namely, that there is considerable variation between individuals in respect of how they respond to requests for access to information that conform to the protocols of ethical research.

Reflecting on experiences such as the example concerning Martin, we were struck by the relevance of O'Neill's thesis that the 'accountability culture' has generated a culture of suspicion rather than a climate of trust. In brief, O'Neill (2002) argues that the decline of levels of reported trust in various professions that is evident in public attitude surveys is an unfortunate by-product of the structures of accountability introduced to reinforce trust in the professions and in a range of public and private institutions. Part of the reason that reinforcing trust was deemed necessary in the first place is inexorable rise in public expectations relating to the quality of service provision. O'Neill (2002) argues that outcome measures and performance targets may have driven out rather than restored trust. In her view, the consequence of the accountability culture has not been a resurgence of trust, but rather the creation of a climate of suspicion, the net effect of which is that individuals sometimes find it difficult to exercise their own judgement about when to trust, particularly in relation to trust in institutions. Yet as O'Neill (2002) suggests and as is borne out by the evidence from this project, there are instances where people continue to place trust in other people, often for reasons that are contingent and hard to define. We also encountered examples in which respondents directly invoked the accountability culture as a reason for withholding information. It is a sad irony that this very information was sought for the ultimate purpose of *improving* the quality of service delivery to individuals considered to be particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes.

In sum, it would seem that O'Neill's arguments, namely that some people are less able to make decisions that require trust, and that the accountability culture is stifling the public sector, are at least partly borne out by our experiences. Consider how much time was spent and email chatter generated by those 'checking us out', and the routine use of a 'legal advisor' in one authority to deal with simple requests for information from government-funded researchers. For all those who invoked rigorous procedures for checking our credentials there were almost as many who seemed very keen to tell us anything we wanted to know almost immediately. Whether their enthusiasm was a result of an abrogation of responsibility for making a decision to trust, assuming it had been cleared by someone in authority, or an indication that they had made a decision to trust is not something that we were able to explore in the context of the research project reported here.

Within this big picture of a range of response to requests for access is the grainy detail of how things worked in those cases where there was neither an automatic 'yes' nor a firm 'no'. These were instances in which people appeared to be reaching a decision about how to respond in the course of the telephone conversation. These were conversations that started off rather one-sidedly, with lots of 'uhu's and 'mmm's and silences which developed into two-sided exchanges. There were also those cases where once appropriate approval had been secured we still had the job of establishing our *personal* trustworthiness. These challenges were all the greater because we did not have personal social capital upon which to draw during the process of negotiating access (e.g, previous contact with service providers known to the respondents or in institutions with which they were familiar).

Our practice in negotiating these initial contacts developed over time as we became more familiar with the range of responses that we might receive. This is not to imply that we were in any way manipulative: merely that we employed different strategies as we negotiated our way and found out 'what worked'. In some cases, where it seemed it might help, we directed prospective informants to our contact in the DCSF so they could 'check us out'. In other cases, we played down the link to the government. We learned to use names of senior people within the authority early on in the conversations with staff located inside authority headquarters; in some cases we emphasised our own professional backgrounds working with young people; in others it was our status as researchers with experience of working in this area that facilitated co-operation. The most enthusiastic response received was from someone who was currently doing research for a Master's degree and appeared delighted to have a researcher with whom to discuss her work. Towards the end of the inception phase we raised the issue of information sharing early on, in order to make it quite clear that we knew this might be an issue, that we had anticipated it, and that we had a solution. Whether to introduce oneself as 'Dr' or by one's first name, as someone from a university or as someone doing research for the government, were other decisions that we had to make rapidly and often intuitively. Seeking points of familiarity or common ground, for example by agreeing that there was the plethora of policies and procedures that had to be

consulted was one strategy. Some degree of personal disclosure on the part of the researcher was another: for example, reference to local places of interest, or to family members who lived nearby, were all effective ways of establishing trust and building rapport.

Sztompka (2006) discusses the increasing interest in trust from a sociological perspective over the last few decades and critiques what he considers to be overly narrow readings of trust as a purely cognitive phenomenon. On these readings, trust is simply a belief in the trustworthiness of either an individual or an institution. Like O'Neill (2002) Sztompka argues that trust is necessarily behavioural; to trust someone or something is to act towards them in a particular way. This highlights the limitations of attitudinal surveys, of asking people what they think will elicit different measures of trust rather than observing what they do. Sztompka (2006) does not suggest that there is no cognitive dimension to trust. Indeed he goes on to provide a long list of cues that we use to inform our beliefs about trustworthiness. These include reputation, possession of credentials, first impressions, the existence of external controls that limit our risk, identifying people as like us or not. On reflection, the process of establishing our trustworthiness was an exercise in managing these cues, and trying to find out which would be most effective in different circumstances. We tried to work out which 'credentials' held value for the particular individual to whom we were talking. For example was having a PhD likely to be more important than experience of working in special schools?. There were certainly some occasions when we made reference to relevant prior experience, in order to facilitate access. We referred to external controls or hierarchies to make it clear that individual risk was limited. We were, of course, restricted in how much we could manage first impressions, as the only cues available to us were voice, telephone manner and the language we used. However, these became important aspects of our approach as it became clear how much was resting on getting the relationship off to a good start.

As we noted above, Sztompka sees trust as multidimensional concept, comprising moral and cultural dimensions as well as cognitive aspects (Sztompka, 1999). It is the cultural dimension of trust that is perhaps of most significance for this study, as the prevailing culture is seen as also having an influence on the decision to trust and the act of trusting. As O'Neill (2002) has suggested, the prevailing culture is one of suspicion, or as Sztompka would have it 'permissiveness for cynicism' (p. 917). The interaction of cognitive, moral and cultural dimensions of trust is under-theorised and under-researched, but it seems clear to us that the experiences of researchers trying to gain access to the public sector would provide fertile ground for exploring these interactions further. On the basis of our experience it would appear that the prevailing culture is mediated by personal moral impulses; and that the reading of cues varies significantly between settings and people, making negotiating access a complex process.

INSIDER/OUTSIDER STATUS

We have already referred to the fact that we chose to present as insiders in order to negotiate access and to establish rapport with professional respondents. However, we would also suggest that there are aspects of being an outsider that can be of great value when conducting research at a distance. When the team originally bid for the contract we wrote:

The children who are referred to Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) or specialist provision are frequently viewed as outsiders because of the challenges they pose to the norms of the education system. As academics working in Scotland, we too can be viewed as outsiders.

So from the beginning we were aware of our status as outsiders, and this was could be regarded as an asset. We had expected that our status as outsiders exemplified by our Scottish accents might go some way to mitigate the image presented to the young people (we are white, middle-class, professional women 'to a man' as it were). One young man serving a 14-month custodial sentence was surprised to learn from the researcher that she had travelled several hundred miles just to meet him. This detail changed the course of the interview, which was conducted in circumstances that were not particularly favourable to frank personal disclosure (i.e. in the visitors' room in a Young Offenders' Institution). Initially hostile and somewhat recalcitrant, the young man was subsequently prepared to discuss challenging personal matters with a member of the research team. However, what we did not predict was how being outsiders in one sense (geographically) whilst insiders in another (all members of the team had previously been practitioners working with young people in schools, social work settings, secure units and/or residential care) would act in our favour. We were familiar with some of the broad issues facing practitioners: we had some credibility as people who would understand. It was not uncommon for service providers to preface their remarks with phrases like 'you know what it's like...'

Insider qualitative research is the term generally used to describe practitioner research where people set out to research a familiar context. Advantages are that respondents might tell you things that they would not necessarily tell a stranger. The disadvantages, however, are that respondents may make assumptions about what the researcher already knows; and the researcher may not think to ask the obvious questions because it is all so familiar. It is indeed the everyday taken-for-granted dimensions that are of such interest to ethno-methodologists, but it can be difficult for an insider to identify what that these are. Like wall-paper, the unspoken assumptions are all around but are rarely the focus of gaze. Van Heugten (2004) writing on insider research stresses the importance of avoiding dominant discourse blind spots, and notes that research of this type is open to accusations of bias and subjectivity. She goes on to say that 'postmodernist considerations helped free me from the subjectivity-objectivity dichotomy, and encouraged me to attend to context and process, rather than content and 'fact' finding' (van Heugten 2004:15). Unfortunately, as is often the case with research commissioned by government to inform a

particular policy agenda, 'fact finding' is precisely the task with which we were faced, no matter how problematic we might argue the notion of 'facts' in relation to work with these young people to be (Pirrie and Macleod, 2009b). As the examples above demonstrate, our status as outsider/insiders gave us, we believe, access to data that would have been much more difficult for complete outsiders to negotiate.

Hodkinson (2005) argues that there are no absolute dichotomies between insider and outsider and notes the difficulties with making assumptions about the groups to which people are seen as belong. The common example given for this is the much-critiqued assertion by Oakley (1981) that as a woman she had an inside track on interviewing other women. It is the fluidity of identities, the possibility of being both insider and outsider at the same time, which we found beneficial in this project. Our position as researchers in based in a different jurisdiction of the UK enabled us to ask what in our home communities might have been seen as 'daft lassie' questions – those in which you feign ignorance in order to try to get your respondent to tell you their version of events. In this project there was little feigning required for the members of the research team based in Scotland. We able to ask questions like 'what policies do you consult when making decisions about young people's care?'. These would to be considered unconvincingly disingenuous if we had asked them of practitioners in Scotland, or if researchers from England were to ask similar questions to respondents based in England. We picked up on subtle differences in legislation and in practice, and those differences enabled us to ask questions and probe more deeply about why things are done in a particular way. For example, at a very basic level the terminology used to refer to young people whose behaviour adults find troubling is different. In Scotland we use the term 'social, emotional and behavioural difficulties' (SEBD) whereas in England and Wales the term in general use is behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) It has been argued that the order of the words in these two phrases poses questions about how these young people are conceptualised (Macleod 2006).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to give a flavour of some of the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research at a geographical distance. Much of what we have discussed here will also have relevance for research conducted under different circumstances. It is important to say that in our view, the advantages inherent in conducting research at a distance, particularly those associated with the positioning of the researchers as both insiders and outsiders, did outweigh the challenges. This is a point not simply about the practicalities of conducting research. We believe that conducting research at a distance (in this case across a national border, but this would also follow for policy community, disciplinary and other borders) allows the research team to generate data that addresses some of the more commonplace, everyday practices which may not be accessible to researchers who are based closer to the research site.

When we wrote the bid for the research project we were unsure of how best to deal with our status as outside the community. In future we will continue to bid for funding for research in England and other parts of the UK and will be much more assertive in our statements about the advantages that we can bring. It is important to note that one member of the research team is based permanently in England and we believe that this added considerably to our credibility with the funding body. We should also add that it was of immeasurable assistance to have a 'translator' on hand who could unpick the complexities of the less familiar legislation and terminology. Again, having a joint venture with at least one person based in the system under enquiry is something that we would attempt to replicate.

Our experience on this project can inform future work in which similar challenges arise. In future we would be very explicit in asking 'up front' about local hierarchies, and seeking the name of the person we would need to have approval from, especially when dealing with staff located within a local authority structure. The importance of having researchers on a the team who have experience as practitioners in the broad area of study cannot be underestimated in terms of establishing credibility. However, perhaps most importantly we will be attuned to the potential complexity and variability of the task of establishing trustworthiness.

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