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A Difficult Negotiation:
Fieldwork Relations with Gatekeepers

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges the researcher faced when undertaking ethnographic fieldwork within a Probation Approved Premises. How access to research sites is achieved is increasingly being discussed, particularly in ethnographic accounts. These discussions often focus on the practical and ethical challenges of entering fieldwork sites. In contrast, how researchers leave study populations or sites is rarely explored, although perhaps as complex and sensitive to negotiate as access.

This paper reflects upon the practical, ethical and emotional dilemmas experienced by the author when conducting research with sex offenders and staff in a probation hostel. The focus of the paper is on how access was gained and how the site and the people who took part in the research were left at the end of the fieldwork. Key issues include: formal and informal gatekeepers to study sites, participants and forms of data; rapport; attachment to researchers and; deciding when to end fieldwork. Issues of gender are alluded to in this paper, but will not be focussed on as they will be dealt with in detail elsewhere. It is concluded that negotiating access is different to gaining entry to a research site, and that these negotiations include considerations of the relationship between the researcher, the research and the researched.

Introduction

Ethnographic studies are characterised by a naturalistic research approach which seeks to describe a human community or culture, built up of the subjective meanings and perspectives of those people participating in the culture (Fetterman, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). To enable a researcher to access and observe a research site in a way that allows them to explore the daily lives of the population living or working in that site, entrée has to be carefully negotiated (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). Recently, how access to a fieldwork site or population was sought and established is increasingly being discussed within reflective accounts of research (*cf.* Duke, 2002; Harris, 1997; Hill, 2004; Mulhall, 2003). However, it is still common for published empirical accounts to deal only briefly with this issue, if at all: such accounts tend to concentrate on challenges for the researcher or research team, rather than for the participants or consequences for data collection (see Sixmith, Boneham and Goldring, 2003 for a discussion of this). Much less discussed is how researchers leave study populations or sites, which can also be complex to negotiate, especially within ethnographic studies (Delamont, 2002).

This paper contributes to the ethnographic literature by considering the author's experiences of undertaking an ethnographic study within a Probation Approved Premises, with particular emphasis on how relationships between the researcher and different levels of gatekeepers can influence fieldwork. The paper focuses on accessing the research site and participants and how they were later left, discussing challenges to these processes (be they practical, ethical or emotional)[1] and how the way in which these were dealt with may subsequently have impacted on fieldwork. Relevant literature is considered alongside this reflective discussion to highlight areas of debate and interest.

The Study

The study aimed to explore the every-day lived experiences of sex offenders within a Probation Approved Premises (hereafter referred to as hostel). The central research questions were to consider the manner in which sex offender residents interacted with other residents and staff members on a daily basis and what characterised these interactions. Foucauldian power relationships (Foucault, 1977) were a key element of this analysis, as was the manner in which sex offender residents used techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza, 1957) and story-telling to manage these relationships and their presentation of themselves and their behaviour. Stemming out of this focus was a consideration of the way in which these interactions were played out within the hostel setting. This included the use of indoor, outdoor, public and private space by staff and resident groups.

In order to uncover the detail of these experiences and interactions, an ethnographic case study design was adopted. This also enabled the fieldwork to be conducted over a lengthy period of time (twenty-one months), thereby allowing for the following of individuals through the hostel system. Within this setting, in-depth interviews were coupled with participant observation techniques to encourage participants to speak openly about their experiences, the challenges they face and their support needs (Johnson, 2002; Lee, 1993). The observations and interviews were informed by readings of residents' case files.

As the research design was exploratory in nature the fieldwork process was designed to be adaptable to the dynamics of hostel life and to respond to serendipitous opportunities for data

collection. This flexibility allowed later stages of the research to be further developed in light of preliminary findings. Thus, the fieldwork involved three concurrent phases of data collection.

Phase one involved observing the behaviours and everyday lives of residents, as well the management of the hostel over two years (on average one day a week, the times of which varied). Informal interviews with residents and staff were conducted and supplementary data was gathered during the course of conversations that were mainly opportunistic in nature. Informal interviews were guided by memorised topic areas. These included asking the respondent about their attitudes towards living in the hostel, living in a communal environment with other offenders, the relationship between groups of offenders and with staff members, towards re-entering the community and employment or educational prospects. Other than broad themes, interviews were led by the individual circumstances and previously observed interactions of participants. Opportunities for informal interviews were sought with individuals and took place spontaneously to make use of participants' time and willingness to engage in the study.

Phase two involved observing the process of risk management decisions within Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Committees (MARACs)[2]. MARAC meetings were held every month and access was agreed for twelve. Detailed notes of the meetings were taken, although active participation in these meetings was neither appropriate nor permitted.

The early themes that emerged from phases one and two informed the topic areas for the phase three interview work. Formal interviews started five months after the commencement of the observation phases. Forty-one formal interviews, guided by the same series of interviewer prompts as set out above, were completed with residents (24) and staff (17).

The following discussion is illustrated by extracts from field notes, in these all residents are denoted by R and then a code number. Staff are denoted by S and then a code number.

Accessing the Site
Central elements of access are gatekeepers. These people can help or hinder research depending upon their personal thoughts on the validity of the research and its value, as well as their approach to the welfare of the people under their charge. The levels of gatekeepers that I had to negotiate in order to access the probation hostel and the sex offender population within accords most easily with the categorisation of formal and informal, although other studies have also used the categories internal and external gatekeepers (Ortiz, 2004). The following reflections use the categories of formal and informal as a framework to reflect upon the layers of gatekeepers that had to be negotiated and the specific challenges associated with each stage.

Formal Gatekeepers
The formal level of negotiation was the hostel manager and his immediate line managers within the Probation Service. I initially approached the manager six months before I planned to start the fieldwork. Significantly, I approached him through a personal friend who happened to work with the manager in developing risk management plans for offenders. Many researchers have found that if they have personal contacts to the study population or site then access is much easier to negotiate (Duke, 2002; Wilkes, 1999). I found that this was indeed the case. Because I was being 'vouched' for by a colleague the manager was immediately friendly and positive about the

research being proposed. Additionally, because I was initially introduced to the manager informally and casually (a later formal meeting to discuss the intricacies of the work was arranged later), I was able to speak to him quickly, bypassing the bureaucracy of arranging meetings through the hostel administrator.

The hostel manager approached his line managers on my behalf and was extremely enthusiastic about being involved in the research. He was also able to facilitate access to members of the MARAC and acted as point of contact for me within the hostel and with field probation officers, thus he was the primary gatekeeper. His support in gaining the agreement of other gatekeepers was essential as the hostel manager was able to establish the credibility of the study with front-line staff members in the hostel and MARAC, especially as I was not introduced to either of these bodies until after the fieldwork had commenced. The support of the hostel manager may have stemmed from his genuine desire to engage in research, but it was supported by the tentative personal relationship that was fostered through the manner in which I was introduced to him. Thus, it was evident at this early stage of the fieldwork that the nature of relationships within the hostel was central to the negotiation of access, and consequently the directions in which I could take the research.

How helpful being female was in gaining formal access so quickly is a matter of consideration. Researchers such as Gurney (1991) have suggested that being a female researcher in a male-dominated environment (as the hostel was) may aid not only formal but informal access because women are perceived as 'warmer' and less threatening than men (Gurney, 1991: 379). Thus, gatekeepers may be less likely to demand the same assurances and level of information from women researchers prior to gaining formal access. Gurney (1991) also acknowledges that in terms of gaining formal access (the 'foot in the door'), being a woman may be problematic because of a perceived lack of professionalism or credibility. However efforts can be made to rectify this by presenting yourself initially 'as the part': dressing for the occasion, being very prepared and bringing authoritive credentials with you. It is difficult for me to know to what extent my relationship with the male manager, or his initial enthusiasm to support the research, was mediated by gender. At least in my first meeting with the manager, I was not able to follow the advice of Gurney in terms of presenting myself as ultra-professional. This was because the colleague who introduced us offered to do so suddenly one morning and I had no opportunity to change my appearance or gather together the accoutrements suggested. However, maybe because I was being introduced in an informal manner, this did not seem to create difficulties. I was also able to assert my professional image at our second meeting to discuss the detail of the project.

Exercising Control
Although I found that informally contacting the primary gatekeeper through a mutual friend and colleague enabled me to gain formal access to the fieldwork site quickly, and to establish a close and supportive working relationship with the primary gatekeeper. The process that I undertook with the manager, and the relationship that subsequently developed, illustrates the power that one gatekeeper may have over the research project and also in contacting other gatekeepers whose approval need to be sought. It was anticipated that a number of levels of gatekeepers would need to be approached, but it was not appreciated that the hostel manager could limit access to higher levels of gatekeepers so completely (the Area Probation Manager, for example). As the manager also ensured contact with me on a daily basis while the fieldwork was being undertaken, his

control of the transmission of information to both higher and lower strata of organisational levels of staff meant that his power was enhanced and maintained during the fieldwork period.

This power relationship between myself and the hostel manager was most evident at critical points within the fieldwork. Most crucial was his control over who I could access in the hostel. For the most part the manager had no involvement in who was or was not part of the study. However, his power to limit this was occasionally exerted. For example, approximately half-way through the fieldwork the hostel manager asked that I inform him or the deputy hostel manager if I became aware of anything that might undermine their work with residents (such as offenders' disengagement in offence-based work programmes). This request caused me some concerns:

> Saw hostel manager on his request for a review meeting.
> He would like me to arrange interviews through the deputy manager so that she is informed in her role as residents' case manager. Also to pass anything that might be relevant to case management or undermine their work. I was not expecting this, and felt rather wrong-footed. I felt uncomfortable but managed to not promise anything other than to honour what we [the hostel manager and I] had talked about before [consent forms]. I am rather concerned about this. I feel that this would change the nature of my role, and that I would not be maintaining the confidentiality agreements of residents. I am worried though. If I do not seem to be co-operative with the manager this could jeopardise my position or relationship with other staff as well as with management.

This request placed me in an awkward position, I did my best to reassure him that if I became aware of any behaviours that indicated an interest in re-offending or discovered previously unknown offences relating to an individual resident I would inform him, however, in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of my participants I could do no more. This position was a reiteration of my original stance on disclosure and was already part of consent forms and information presented to participants (both staff and residents). This position was accepted although towards the end of the fieldwork a similar request was made regarding an individual resident which I also (awkwardly) refused.

I found making this stand for my ethical position difficult to do. I was very grateful to the hostel manager for his support and help in negotiating access agreements from his line managers at the start of the fieldwork process, and this gratitude meant that I felt I owed it to the manager to be as helpful as I could be. However, this was tempered by my resentment that he should ask me to compromise my independent role within the hostel. Because of these conflicting emotions, I felt slightly embarrassed at having to reiterate my original position of confidentiality and found that for a short period afterwards I was endeavouring to avoid the hostel manager as well as the deputy hostel manager. This was so I did not have to face either the practical or emotional fallout from the conversation. Of course, this tactic only worked in the short-term, but it allowed me to collect my thoughts and to approach the manager after I had worked through my emotions.

Rapport as Control?
The rapport I needed to maintain with the hostel manager further evidences his power over both the fieldwork and my conduct in the hostel. It also demonstrates the dilemmas presented by the

need to maintain positive and beneficial research relationships. Russell *et al.* (2002) discusses the concept of rapport, commenting that 'old-style' ethnography unproblematically regarded rapport as a strategy to manage research relationships (which could be very problematic in themselves) which sits uncomfortably with the 'new-style' ethnography which recognises respondents' active interpretation of their world. Through this more challenging conceptualisation of rapport, the ongoing negotiation of relations between myself and the hostel manager can be better understood. My role in establishing rapport was not simply to manage the manager's expectations of me and the research or to endeavour to get him to like me. Rather it was to be vigilant of both his and my shifting roles and professional needs. Sometimes this brought us into conflict where rapport was difficult to maintain, but this was not necessarily characteristic of our continuing relationship, nor coloured subsequent events.

Funder (2005) discusses his experiences of rapport, noting that the establishment of rapport is necessarily disingenuous in that it is purposeful, at least, though not always solely, from the perspective of the researcher. However, rapport is not simply about the researcher presenting a less than honest, if not false, representation of their self, it is necessarily a further dimension of power relations between the researcher and the researched. This relationship is characterised by the researcher's desire (and possibly need) to establish and maintain rapport in order to gain rich data, however, the respondent does not have these concerns. Although it may be assumed that once established, rapport favours the researcher this is not always so. Funder (2005) also comments that the researcher may be lulled into believing that, because they feel they have established rapport, their participants are frank and candid with them. I found that especially hostel residents would use me to serve their own interests. Even where they were comfortable with my presence and at ease in general conversation, it was apparent that they would tell me (as well as other residents and staff) half-truths, lies and stories in order to present an image they wished to portray.

Rapport could also be a mechanism for participants gaining power. The ability of researchers to gather rich and detailed data depends upon the establishment and maintenance of positive relationships. Therefore, some degree of control over the research was passed to staff and residents as their trust in me was crucial to their choice to participate (Kalir, 2006). This control was not necessarily consciously exercised by participants, but nevertheless, their willingness to engage in the research and to be open with me was the foundation stone of the fieldwork. My desire to ensure rapport meant that as much as I could try to influence participants' perceptions of me and to persuade them that the project and I were worth investing time in, in the end they could make or break the project. Rapport was thus not a strategy to manage research relationships, but rather a necessary, fundamental element of conducting ethnography which is indicative of the power relations between myself and participants.

The power differentials between researchers and formal gatekeepers illustrated here have been noted in earlier ethnographic reflections such as Harris (1997) and Funder (2005). Harris similarly conducted fieldwork within a community based institutional setting. She was also unprepared for her powerlessness, discovering that she occupied a position of "absolutely no status, power or even credibility in the setting [...]" (Harris, 1997: 7). These reflective accounts demonstrate not only the practical challenges associated with the relationship between researchers and formal gatekeepers, but also some of the emotional and ethical debates that researchers have with

themselves. Often, on paper, these issues appear simple, but in the field every decision is fraught with ramifications and consequences that make them difficult.

Negotiating staff gatekeepers

Gaining access via managers or supervisors can be helpful to ensure that you have access to a population (within which individuals consent to take part in the research or not) and gives the research credibility amongst staff working within the site. But, as Mulhall (2003) found, further informal gatekeepers also need to be approached before members of the site will fully participate in the research. These informal gatekeepers may need to be negotiated on a number of levels, for example, strategic managers, operational managers and informal leaders of the research population (Mulhall, 2003). That various levels of gatekeepers may need to be approached indicates that gaining access is not a single event but part of an ongoing process that may need to be revisited over the course of the fieldwork (Duke, 2002).

In this study informal gatekeepers were categorised as either hostel staff or residents. These were identified at the start of the fieldwork through the process of endeavouring to access individuals and areas within the hostel. It became apparent very quickly that some staff members and residents were able to influence who else would engage with me and the research project. These informal gatekeepers were not necessarily in structural positions to exercise this control, but rather influenced others through the strength of their personality and character.

Establishing Rapport with Staff: Who Am I?

My first step in negotiating access with staff gatekeepers was to establish rapport. In order to achieve this, at the manager's suggestion, I worked in the hostel in a paid casual role (providing relief cover for sickness, holidays and training) prior to commencing the formal research phase. This suggestion presented an immediate dilemma: it was an opportunity to uncover the inner workings of the hostel and the systems in place from the inside, but it could potentially undermine the neutrality of the research. The strengths and weaknesses of this approach are outlined by Reiner (2000) in relation to his research on the police, particularly regarding the balance between objectivity and ethnocentricity and between subjectivity and understanding.

Initially I was concerned about the potential consequences of becoming an 'insider' as opposed to an 'outsider'. These concerns were not only about how residents may view me, and as a consequence if they would talk to me, but were also about my own sense of comfort in the role. Becoming a member of staff meant that access may be more easily negotiated, but could also mean I was perceived as a 'spy' for management by front-line workers and residents. However, remaining an outsider researching the hostel might lead to the informal structure and practice of the hostel never being revealed.

I reached a compromise by working in the hostel for four months, leaving a three month window before re-entering the hostel as an independent researcher. Throughout the time I worked in the hostel I was very open about my intentions to undertake research and that the working role was only temporary. This allowed information gained through working within the hostel to be gathered whilst, hopefully, allaying fears regarding my partiality. Only two residents were still in the hostel after the three month window; when explained to them, the differences in my role were understood. My experiences contrast with those of Harris (1997) who found that she had great

difficulty in explaining her 'other than staff' status. Her position in a rehabilitative, residential institution for people suffering from profound deafness is somewhat comparable to my own, and her strategies for ensuring people were aware of her status and research were likewise similar. Nevertheless, she states that her participants found it difficult to separate her from staff. This may have been because she took on a more staff-like role, undertaking staff duties and also residing at the hostel. She admits that she went a "bit native" (Harris, 1997; 5), over identifying with staff, and this may have made her role unclear and affected her research relationships.

Perhaps because I did not identify myself with staff, despite my work, I never became confused about my 'insider-outsider' position. Reiner (2000) above, defined this position mainly in terms of working status, but I found that I had more sympathy with Chavez (2008) and Sherif's (2001) concepts. They based position on socialisation to the values and culture of the researched population. Thus, someone may work in an institution, but not be socialised to the culture, and thus are 'outsiders'.

This understanding of positionality accords most with my experiences. However, my position was not something that I simply ascribed to myself; it was ascribed to me as well. Sherif (2001) refers to this in her discussion of how she was perceived whilst undertaking ethnographic research in Egypt. This meant that her status as 'insider' or 'outsider' was a negotiation between her own self-perceptions, the perceptions of others and the demands of the research. I found in the hostel that people viewed me and my position differently depending upon the relationship that I had with individuals on a personal level. If we were friendly I was more likely to be regarded as nearer to their own status (whatever they thought that was), and thus an 'insider'. But this could be very specific. For example, staff who worked on an *ad hoc* basis to provide cover (as I did initially), regarded me as an 'insider' to their role: I had worked in the same job and, as a researcher, I occupied the same no-man's land of not being a resident but not being 'proper' staff either. However, for Probation Service Officers I could be an 'insider' to their role too. I was more informed than casual staff, I was not a resident and had not the training that was central to the Probation Officer's role. Thus it was believed by many that I must share their outlook more than with any other population in the hostel. So, it was that early in the fieldwork I felt I had established a role and status within the hostel that weaved carefully through the various groups working and residing there, trying to ensure that I was not seen as challenging any of them. But, simultaneously I was perceived by the groups in a variety of insider/outsider positions that were much more shifting and elusive to influence than I expected.

In practice, the time I spent working in the hostel not only offered me a greater and more detailed understanding of the role of the hostel, staff and Probation Service, it also allowed me to become thoroughly conversant with the systems in place to monitor the residents and the efficiency of the hostel. Importantly, it encouraged a more robust and genuine rapport to be established with staff working within the hostel and related agencies. This rapport was built upon a shared understanding of working in the hostel. Additionally, because I was identifiable as 'staff' and not some 'other' status (which I was later to adopt) staff were not concerned about my role within the hostel, or how this related to themselves. This positive relationship with staff was valuable in terms of accessing information throughout the study and overcoming some of the difficulties of continually negotiating access to essential information, for example, reiterating the purpose and remit of the study and ensuring that gatekeepers are not alienated by the research process (Duke,

2002).

Staff Gatekeeping Residents
Until the latter stages of the project, residential staff continued to regard me as 'one of them', talking openly and without concern. However, my rapport with staff could become problematic at times. This was because as staff thought of me as being an informal staff member they sometimes presented me as such to residents:

> S16 asked me if I wanted to talk to R6 (I've never met him before). I said I wouldn't mind being introduced so S16 found him alone and in the non-smoking lounge and introduced me. S16 said that I was not staff but that R6 could talk to me instead of staff. Then he said about how he [R6] had to be compliant with staff wishes. S16 stood up while saying this while I sat with R6. When S16 left I had to undo all this and explain about the project, confidentiality, and that I would not pass on anything if he did not want me to. I made my position very clear and repeated myself (in different terms) a number of times.

Whilst such incidents illustrated the nature of the relationship that I had with staff, at least in the first year of the fieldwork, they could potentially be detrimental to my rapport with residents.

Staff continually regarded resident participation as something that was controlled either by staff or by me. This staff control of resident behaviour is systemic within hostels (Reeves, 2008) and was therefore difficult for me to counter. Consequently, it meant that I found it sometimes difficult to know to what extent consent from residents was truly voluntary. The incident described above, when S16 introduced me to R6, illustrates how staff members could act as impromptu gatekeepers to a resident. Although their interventions were mostly intended to be helpful, staff could easily undermine my presentation of the research and my position in the hostel. By linking me with hostel requirements of the residents I could become regarded as a spy of the staff, fostering suspicion within the resident population; a situation which could limit the co-operation of residents, and potentially affect the quality of the data gathered.

As may be expected, the impact of working with staff dissipated over time, as I increasingly emphasised my 'neutral' role (likened to a visitor). Some of the significant issues arising from this gradual change in staff members' perceptions of my role and allegiances are discussed in relation to leaving the research site below.

Negotiating Resident Gatekeepers
Once access to the hostel was achieved the consent of residents had to be negotiated, which was a challenging and ongoing process. This was complicated by residents' position within the hostel: they were largely powerless, yet at the same time felt ownership over space within the hostel because they lived there. Although the research was conducted solely within the lower floor of the hostel (the communal areas) I was aware that, for residents, the hostel was home, albeit temporarily. It was, therefore, necessary to explain the research clearly and on a regular basis. This helped to ensure that participants were conversant with the purpose of the study and the nature of their involvement without intruding unnecessarily in their everyday lives. However, the initial consent given by residents quickly became obsolete, not only because of the timescale of

the research, but because the resident composition was constantly changing. Because of this, established residents who had lived in the hostel for many months acted as informal gatekeepers to other residents by introducing me to them.

This process gave the research some credibility amongst the resident population and myself an 'other than staff' status. I ascertained new residents' understanding of the research by taking time to explain the purpose of the study after being introduced. Notably, the credibility I gained among residents was different to that amongst staff. With staff, the support of the hostel manager was key; but this was, at best, unimportant to residents, at worst it was seen as an endorsement from the 'enemy'. Thus, getting the 'OK' from central members of the resident group meant that I was being accepted as 'not staff' and as somebody whom they could trust (to an extent). Until this status was established I was an enigma to residents, it was only through other resident participants that I could approach many new residents:

> R15 sees me through the corridor sitting in the foyer. He has not spoken to me much yet, but he comes in and says "hi". He sits down and looks at me repeatedly. R7 is constantly talking to me and asking me things. R15 also looks at me between sentences.

> I think R15 is weighing me up – he's untrusting at the moment.

Controlling my access to other residents was not the only form of gatekeeping residents undertook. They could also restrict or skew the information that I was able to access. For example, residents became very interested in the project, enquiring about its progress and relating incidents that may have happened since my last visit. Whilst this was useful, selectivity bias in these instances was a concern, although over time it was evident that residents were often bored and related anything of note to a new audience. In these instances I learned not to rely on any one individual's account of incidents in case of bias of perspective; care was taken to discuss incidents with other residents and staff in an effort to not only establish commonalities, but also the differences in accounts and interpretations of events. This also aided the circumvention of the information gatekeeping activities of individuals or interest groups.

The Beginning of the End
The end was a prolonged stage in the fieldwork. It did not come suddenly and it was not unexpected. However, it was not of my choosing either. I had planned the end (when, how and why), but as the fieldwork progressed I gradually became aware that my relationships in the hostel were changing and this heralded my departure. The most significant developments were evident amongst staff participants. For the most part, although their consent and involvement in the research had to be continually negotiated, staff had been very willing to talk in detail about a subject they held strong views on. The attitude of most staff towards my presence in the hostel did not change over time. However, there were three members (of a staff of 21) whose attitudes changed apparently because they were suspicious and mistrustful of my motivations in the research. These three relationships were manifestations of simmering confusions or discontents within the staff population, for the majority of whom these were of minor or no real importance.

One of the staff members failed to understand my neutral role and continually complained that I

did not work enough in the hostel. The other two gradually became concerned about my role and the research over time. Initially I felt that this change was because I had already been in the hostel for 21 months and I had reached a point when staff were starting to become restless with my presence (I believe this probably was the case for some staff members). However, simultaneously I observed growing suspicion regarding the research purpose from hostel and MARAC management, with concerns being raised regarding what data I was collecting and how I would present it. On reflection, this concern was attributable to external factors; a Home Office inspection was imminent.

As many other researchers have also found (*cf.* Calvey, 2000), my exit from the hostel was driven by external factors rather than a planned strategy. However, this prompted me to reassess the amount and quality of the data I had gathered. In addition, I had, like Ortiz (2004), started to feel 'trapped' in the hostel; only undertaking the fieldwork out of a sense of duty and habit. Although I had, up until this point, ignored these emotions I realised that I no longer felt like the data I was collecting was adding anything to that already gathered: I had reached data saturation and was now in danger of compulsive data collection (Ortiz, 2004). This meant that I neither had the desire nor the reasoning to further negotiate access to the hostel. At this time I had three months left of my planned fieldwork phase of twenty-four months. Given that I had reached data saturation I became concerned that undergoing sensitive negotiations to ensure that I gathered detailed and open data for the rest of the planned period was not only unnecessary but may endanger my relationship with hostel management. I therefore planned my exit from the hostel without fully resolving all these issues.

Leaving the hostel and participants
The manner in which I exited the study site was particularly difficult to negotiate as many participants had disclosed personal information to me and I had been privy to highly sensitive data over a long period of time. Jacobsen and Landau (2003) note that it is these types of research relationships that require the most delicate and thoughtful withdrawal. These issues demanded that I exit the site with care and consideration for those participants still resident or working within the hostel because they were understandably concerned that data relating to them would be treated confidentially and with respect. Leaving the hostel can cause participants to reassess their behaviour and comments; time and distance enabling them to objectively reflect upon themselves. At the same time that participants may be realising the value and effect of their involvement, the researcher is leaving, giving participants little further opportunity to shape their contribution. Until this point both I and the participants had been focussing on the purpose of the research and the nature of the data gathered, suddenly how I would present them was paramount. Therefore, when exiting the site or resident population it was important to be sensitive to the fears of participants and assure them that their views would be presented honestly, fairly and anonymously.

Exiting the hostel and resident population was not only delicate in terms of the data, but also because of the relationships that had developed over the course of the fieldwork. These issues were highlighted because of the long data collection period. What I considered to be research relationships in which I was not personally invested, others considered to be tentative friendships or therapeutic relationships. These latter versions of my relationships with participants were particularly prevalent amongst the residents, for whom I had been a 'listener'. For many residents

I had been their only opportunity to talk openly about themselves, their experiences within the hostel and, their fears and hopes for the future, without it being recorded in their files and being used to decide how they would be managed by the probation service.

The potential for attachment to the researcher was noted by Ortiz (2004) who also occupied a cathartic role for his participants, many of whom similarly felt isolated from other members of their community. Because of their interpretations and experiences of the research relationship, some residents wanted to maintain a similar 'listening' relationship beyond the fieldwork, requesting that I visit them in the hostel after the fieldwork had ended. I explained to these participants that I had been allowed to enter the hostel whilst collecting data and that access to the hostel was withdrawn on completion of the fieldwork. Requests to meet outside the hostel were refused on the grounds that hostel management would have to be informed and consent would be unlikely.

Although, I left the hostel site with no intentions to contact participants other than the hostel manager, a number of unplanned meetings with residents occurred nevertheless. This happened because at the time I conducted the fieldwork I lived in the same local area as the hostel and on occasion I would meet a resident in the street. Whilst the fieldwork was ongoing this was useful as I could keep up to date with hostel events in between visits. However, once the fieldwork had ended some residents wanted to engage in conversation when we chanced to meet. I did not feel it appropriate to maintain relationships with residents from the hostel and, to my shame, felt uneasy by these encounters:

> I saw R47 (convicted of 3 rapes against adult women) in the town centre today. I was with a friend which made me feel particularly wary and uncomfortable about meeting him. But he stopped and spoke to me. He was friendly, but I didn't want him to notice my friend too much, or she him. I am concerned that I cannot tell her to be careful of getting to know him if she should happen to meet him again when she is on her own. This is R47's offence pattern: that he strikes up an acquaintance with women.

My unease stemmed from my concern that the offenders I was meeting were classified as high risk sex offenders. The situations were compounded if I was in company with people who were not aware of this and whom I could not inform, but whom I felt I should protect (the situation recounted above was soon resolved when R47 was returned to prison for persistent rule breaking). Because there were no male researchers involved in this study I was not able to explore whether my emotional reactions to these encounters were mediated by my gender, but I suspect it was. My concern and wariness was due to no longer having the protection of the hostel institution or easily accessible staff to help me if I felt threatened. Thus, the power relationship had changed. I no longer felt in control of the situation or relationship.

My shame resulted from my ethical approach to the research. I had undertaken an ethnographic study in order to shed light on the experiences of sex offenders within a rarely studied section of the criminal justice system. Thus, offenders' experiences, accounts, understandings and perceptions were central to the research. By wanting to cut off any contact with them once the fieldwork was over I felt that I had used them for my research, rather than engaging them in the

process. To address this concern I had told all participants that they could contact me via the hostel management or University in which I was based if they had concerns regarding their involvement in the research. Unsurprisingly, no-one contacted me through this formal route. Fortunately, so I could recover from my ethical and emotional conflict, the chance meetings became less frequent as the residents that I had known in the hostel were moved out of the area, and eventually I myself moved away (for unrelated reasons).

Conclusion

This reflective account of undertaking ethnographic research with sex offenders in a probation hostel has highlighted some of the underlying issues that all researchers taking this approach need to face and reflect upon. Considering the process of entering and leaving a research site in terms of my emotions and the engagement of participants has enabled the practice of doing fieldwork to be discussed in a way that incorporates the underlying human relationships that are necessarily at the heart of ethnographic research. Often it is this very humanness of social interaction that is stripped from fieldwork accounts.

My personal reactions and emotions towards participants and the process of doing fieldwork were rarely considered at the time, except when the emotions of others were data in themselves or prompted the restriction of data (gatekeeping activities). Although this emotional distancing of myself from the subject of the study may have been a personal coping strategy (to deal with the offence-related talk of sex offenders), it is evident that an ongoing reflection of the researcher's position and relationships with people in the research site can aid the conduct of research; not only in terms of guiding data collection, but managing the fieldwork relationships in ways that can support the researcher and uncover aspects of the community or culture that would otherwise be overlooked.

In practice, doing ethnographic fieldwork is not as straightforward as negotiating access with a primary gatekeeper, or even a body of formal gatekeepers. Once physical access to a site or population has been agreed, the co-operation of people within the site, community or culture has to be established. This is a complex activity, fraught with ethical and emotional challenges. At all stages of the process access to participants and data needs to be continually re-iterated and re-negotiated, thus it is apparent that gaining permission to enter a field or contact participants is a very different matter to accessing them. The latter involves rapport and engagement between the researcher and the cultural group. This is where the most challenging difficulties occur.

Although the emotional relationships that develop due to the negotiation of access and the establishing of rapport can support the researcher in the fieldwork and may, in themselves, be data, they become ever-more challenging when it is time to leave the study site and/or population. The issues relating to access, which researchers are much more aware of and tend to plan in greater detail, are just as important in these latter stages of the fieldwork. The same ethical principles that informed the design and conduct of the work to this stage are necessarily part of the withdrawal. However, to complicate matters, decisions or events within the fieldwork phase may only now reveal themselves as important. It is the nature of relationships that they are at their most challenging when there is a significant event. Thus, the ethnographic researcher needs to be aware that the trajectory of fieldwork is shaped by the manner in which relationships with formal

and informal gatekeepers are developed and played out.

Endnotes

[1]It is recognised that gender may have a significant impact upon how fieldwork is undertaken and the directions in which the research may develop. However, this paper will focus solely on gatekeeping, referring to gender where appropriate, but the importance and influence of gender on the study will be explored in detail in a separate paper.

[2] Founded on the Home Office initiative of MAPPAs – Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements established through the Criminal Justice and Court Services' Act 2000, which came into effect in 2001. They are multi-agency committees involving members from a range of statutory and independent sectors that meet regularly to discuss local high risk offenders and their management plans.

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