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Negotiating Research Relationships: undertaking fieldwork with sex offenders and probation staff

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The Study

- 2 year ethnographic study of the lived experiences of sex offenders residing in a Probation Approved Premises (hostel)
- Observation of life in the hostel
- Observation of MARAC (MAPPP)
- Informal interviews with residents (24) and staff (17)

These were vital to the fieldwork
Interviewees -> active participants in research

- **Residents:**
  - 23 male, 1 female
  - 21 sex offenders

- **Staff:**
  - 15 male, 2 female
  - 8 RSO, 3 relief RSO, 5 PSO and 1 SPO
Gatekeepers to fieldwork

- Help or hinder access to:
  - Research site
  - Research population
  - Individuals
  - Other forms of data such as files
  - The quality of data

- Formal and Informal gatekeepers
Formal Gatekeepers

Formal gatekeepers
Grant access to Fieldwork site, population, other forms of data

Formal approach required and formal access agreed

Hostel staff
Hostel Residents
Resident files
Hostel Operation
MARACs
# Primary Gatekeeper

- **Hostel Manager**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positives</th>
<th>Negatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Ensured initial access granted</td>
<td>*Retained control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Facilitated later informal staff access</td>
<td>*Limited access to line managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Remained supportive</td>
<td>*controlled transmission of info. from above &amp; below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*gave info. re: operation of hostel</td>
<td>*requested breaches of confidence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Negotiating formal access = managing relationships

- Mainly with primary gatekeeper
- Relationship characterised by power

- Did I relinquish some of my own control over the fieldwork to him to secure his support?

- Maybe a little...
Informal Gatekeepers

- Hostel staff
- Hostel Residents
- Resident files
- Hostel Operation
- MARACs

Formal Gatekeepers:
- Staff & resident gatekeepers
- Gatekeepers to data

Informal Gatekeepers:
- Hostel staff
- Hostel Residents
- Resident files
- Hostel Operation
- MARACs

Informal Gatekeepers

Researcher

Informal Gatekeepers

Staff & resident gatekeepers

Gatekeepers to data

Informal Gatekeepers

Hostel staff

Hostel Residents

Resident files

Hostel Operation

MARACs
Managing informal gatekeeper relationships

1. Staff gatekeepers
   - Essential to establish rapport
     - Manager support both helpful & unhelpful
     - Most imp. = work as a staff member
     - Who was I?
   - Staff were gatekeepers to residents
   - (often gave false impressions)
Managing informal gatekeeper relationships

2. Resident gatekeepers

Essential to establish ‘non-staff’ status
- Problems of changing population – informed consent possible?
- Most imp. = spending time in the hostel
- Who was I?
- What purpose could I serve them?
Rapport: the foundation of productive relationships?

- Yes - need to be able to identify with people
  - Be empathic & understanding
  - Put them at ease
  - Establish trust in confidentiality

- No – ‘Trust No One’
  - Different organisational & personal agenda’s
  - Lulls researcher into false sense of security?
Summary

- Undertaking fieldwork is primarily about managing relationships.
- A close working relationship with gatekeepers can have negatives as well as positives.
- Managing these relationships requires constant re-negotiation of the researcher role, position and status.