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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

Researcher
## 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...
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