

Strategies for gaining access to organisations and informants in qualitative studies

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One of the most fundamental tasks relating to the undertaking of fieldwork for a qualitative research study lies in “gaining access”. This involves both securing entry into a particular organisation and ensuring that individuals associated with it, such as employees or users, will serve as informants. In terms of the first problem, a range of strategies that may be adopted by the investigator is highlighted in this paper. The methods include using endorsements from “authorities”, gradually phasing one’s entry into the organisation, offering benefits of some kind to managers in the event of their cooperation, responding to gatekeepers’ concerns honestly, demonstrating one’s suitability for entry in terms of professional background and experience, and remaining receptive to managers’ suggestions for the study. To encourage the cooperation of those associated with the organisation, the researcher may well favour a policy of prolonged engagement, seek to blend in with the community, offer incentives where appropriate and acknowledge openly the value of informants’ contributions. These strategies are considered in detail. The article also stresses the importance of gaining the approval of any “third parties” that may be responsible for the welfare of those people whom the researcher has targeted as informants.

Keywords: Gaining access, fieldwork, gatekeepers, barriers to research

1. Introduction

For many qualitative investigators, one of the most pressing research concerns lies in “gaining access”. The researcher’s success in this regard will have a significant effect on the nature and quality of the data collected, on the insight into the organisation and its members that the investigator is able to gain, and, ultimately, on the trustworthiness of the findings. Essentially, there are two problems of access that must be tackled. The first is that of securing entry into the organisations in which it is hoped the fieldwork will be conducted. This is one of the most fundamental tasks of all since any gatekeepers who deny the researcher access to their organisations also effectively prevent him or her from approaching all the potential informants within them, unless, of course, there are alternative routes available to the investigator. Any

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such lack of cooperation may throw into doubt the whole fieldwork element of the project, especially if the particular organisations involved have been targeted for the study on the basis of their unique characteristics. As Burgess notes, “access is a prerequisite; a precondition for the research to be conducted” [1]. The second problem lies in persuading individual informants associated with the organisations to contribute data, usually via focus groups or one-to-one interviews. Such people may include employees and users. This paper considers the tactics that the researcher may implement to tackle each issue.

2. Gaining access to organisations

2.1. Tactic one – The “known sponsor approach”

This term is used by Patton, who believes the strategy to be the most successful method of securing entry in most cases [2]. If, in advance of the fieldwork, project funding has been secured from a reputable organisation, the researcher will be able to cite that body’s support in order to establish his or her own credibility and legitimacy when making the first approaches. These may not initially be directed at the organisations in which the researcher wishes to conduct the fieldwork but at a higher level body that exercises overall control over them. Support at this executive level may be critical to the researcher’s success in gaining access to the subordinate organisations since, as Stake notes, “individuals often immediately acquiesce if a superior has granted permission” [3]. An arrangement may be reached in which a manager at the executive level contacts the appropriate organisations in advance of the investigator making his or her approaches, and draws attention to the fact that the project has received official approval. If the study is being conducted under the auspices of a learned institution, such as the university where the researcher works, he or she may be able to refer to independent endorsements from as many as three separate parties – this organisation, the funding provider and, of course, the manager who has approved the approach that is to be made to the organisations which it is hoped will actually take part. In all written communications, the researcher may wish to use headed notepaper to emphasise his or her status.

A major drawback of the “known sponsor approach” that may emerge for investigators once they have entered the field must also be recognised, however. As Punch notes, “Researchers may suffer by being continually seen as extensions of their political sponsors within the setting despite their denials to the contrary” [4]. This problem is analogous to that of “obstructive identifications”, which was highlighted by Dalton as early as the 1950s [5]. Certainly references to any sponsor can easily exacerbate a danger detected by Walsh, namely that members of the host community are likely to cast the investigator in a particular role, such as “expert” or “critic” [6], whereas he or she may prefer to cultivate a naiveté that is consistent with his or her position as a newcomer or stranger. The investigator may even, of course, ally himself or

herself with a sponsor who, unbeknownst to him or her, is actively disliked by the prospective informants and citing the support of this person may stimulate a negative reaction to the research.

2.2. Tactic two – Phased entry

Initially, organisations targeted by the researcher may be asked to complete a simple questionnaire relating to their characteristics. This may actually form part of a wider sampling process, since, if the investigator is employing a purposive sample, it may be necessary to ensure that the organisations ultimately asked to participate meet certain criteria. The data collected via the questionnaire may also facilitate comparison of the different organisations that have been targeted. This may be useful when the investigator writes the section of the research report devoted to background information about the organisations in which the fieldwork took place. In terms of gaining access, this preliminary contact can serve as an “ice-breaker” and afford the investigator a foothold in the organisations since, when further, more demanding involvement is needed from them through providing access to informants and, perhaps, appropriate documents, the researcher will be able to identify himself or herself as someone whom the organisations already know and have already assisted.

2.3. Tactic three – Reciprocity

Sharp and Howard believe that entry is best ensured if the investigator agrees to share his or her findings with the collaborating organisations and make available to them copies of any papers that emerge from the research activity [7]. Moreover, Bogdan and Biklen suggest that, if such a collaborating organisation is to offer the investigator access to the site, its personnel and users, its managers may feel entitled to some reward from the work [8]. Where the project can be shown to benefit the organisation, this goes some way to fostering the ideal exchange relationship or “reciprocity” identified by Jorgensen [9]. To this end, where appropriate, any organisations approached may, even before indicating their willingness to become involved, be provided with a copy of a literature review prepared by the investigator. Although this document will have been produced as part of the research activity itself, its subject matter may be of considerable interest and value to practitioners in the field. The action serves to demonstrate good intentions on the part of the researcher, too. Similarly, at an early stage, the investigator may wish to draw the attention of the organisations approached to any further offers he or she may intend to make, such as plans to disseminate the findings of the finished project to organisations that choose to participate. This may be done via papers and at workshops/seminars staged after the analysis of the study data. A comparable policy of reciprocity has been employed by, among others, Pickard, who produced reports and presentations for various committees within the organisations in which her fieldwork took place [10], and Gross, who provided each of the participating organisations with a copy of

her final research report [11]. The researcher should, however, be wary of giving extravagant undertakings. In attempting to gain access to organisations, it is tempting to offer too much and one may regret making rash promises at a later stage in the work.

2.4. Tactic four – Openness

Gorman and Clayton [12] and Bogdan and Biklen [13] identify a range of issues which they consider the researcher should be prepared to address honestly in the dialogues with representatives of collaborating institutions in order to gain access. The issues include the reasons for the choice of fieldwork sites, the work that will be undertaken there, the nature and extent of any disruption that will be caused and the procedures for reporting the study's results. Stake draws attention to similar issues, and notes that the researcher should also be ready to discuss the envisaged timescale for the work and any plans that have been made to "anonymise" the data [14]. The latter is likely to be of particular interest if there is any potential for an organisation to be represented adversely in the final report. The researcher must not only be willing to discuss these matters, but should be well prepared, too, for any predictable questions regarding them. In addition, it should be recognised that, in truly qualitative work characterised by an emergent design or indeed in any research in which fieldwork is sustained over a lengthy period, the process of negotiating access may well prove to be an ongoing one since the researcher may be unable to forecast at the outset of the study the demands that he or she is to make on the organisation and its staff.

2.5. Tactic five – Demonstration of professional suitability

During discussions involving the professionals with whom he or she comes into contact when making the preliminary approaches, the researcher should be able to demonstrate an awareness of wider professional trends, as well as any more local developments. Membership of appropriate professional associations and references to relevant experience, employment and personal interests can also be critical in ensuring that the researcher is accepted by managers and in breaking down barriers between the two parties. Initially, staff will almost certainly view the investigator as an "outsider". If the researcher wishes to undertake fieldwork in a school, the safety of the youngsters with whom he or she will come into contact is likely to be a significant concern. In this context, any clear police checks that the researcher has received may help to assure school staff that he or she will present no danger to pupils, as well as enabling the school to demonstrate to others that the organisation has taken proper precautions in allowing access.

2.6. Tactic six – Exploitation of past links with the organisations

Where the researcher has any previous connections with the organisations approached or the immediate local area, these associations may be emphasised in the

early approaches that he or she makes. Similarly, the use of contacts in terms of members of staff within the organisations can be invaluable in ensuring that the investigator gains the access that is desired.

2.7. Tactic seven – Receptiveness to suggestions

It is possible that managers of the organisations will offer their own ideas to the researcher about the tactics that he or she intends to use during the fieldwork, particularly with regard to data collection methods and the sampling of individuals within their organisations. Some of the points made may even take the form of conditions. These may be helpful, however, as the manager is better equipped than the investigator to know the true situation “on the ground” and what is acceptable to personnel and users. Such stipulations may initially be resented by the researcher, who, for his or her part, may have already formed a plan of how the study should take place and be reluctant to deviate from it. Nevertheless, unless the manager’s proposals conflict markedly with the aims of the project, the investigator may be well advised simply to agree in order to ensure that he or she is indeed allowed access into the organisation.

Sieber recognises how such a policy of consultation may be extended to include potential participants. If they are involved in the planning of the study, the researcher may learn how they are likely to react to the demands that he or she intends to impose on them and ultimately the methods employed may be made as acceptable as possible to the intended research subjects [15].

3. Gaining access to individual informants

If the researcher accepts Douglas’s belief that “conflict is the reality of life; suspicion is the guiding principle” [16], the task of persuading individual people associated with the targeted organisations to participate in the project may appear daunting. Nevertheless, several of the investigator’s strategies for gaining access to the organisations themselves are again suitable in this context. In particular, he or she may seek to use an endorsement from a “known sponsor”, develop a reciprocal relationship between himself or herself and potential informants, maintain an open and honest perspective when answering questions about his or her work and emphasise any past associations between himself or herself and the individuals within the organisations. Furthermore, if the support and approval of a gatekeeper can be gained, this individual, as well as controlling access, may serve as a key informant who introduces the researcher to others who may become participants. In addition, the investigator may wish to employ the following tactics.

3.1. *Tactic one – Prolonged engagement*

Although prolonged engagement with the research subjects is often understood to be a critical strategy for establishing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, it may also prove essential for merely securing the participation of those from whom the researcher would like to collect data. Lincoln and Guba suggest that, on entering an organisation, the investigator requires a period of “orientation and overview” in order to gain the trust of and to develop a rapport with potential informants [17]. Over time, any sense of threat that may accompany the researcher’s presence will diminish and, with careful handling, erroneous associations which may be made between the investigator and authority figures will be revealed to be unjustified. Without such preliminary groundwork on the part of the researcher, however, individuals may simply be unwilling to contribute data.

3.2. *Tactic two – The “chameleon” approach*

This strategy is especially crucial in ethnographic research, in which the investigator seeks to immerse himself or herself in a particular community. Broadly, the researcher attempts to ensure that he or she is not wildly incongruous within the world of the participants or in terms of the culture of the organisation in which he or she is operating. As with prolonged engagement, the aim is to gain acceptance. Glesne and Peshkin note that the investigator’s “appearance, speech and behaviour must be acceptable to... research participants” [18]. This may be achieved in advance of any formal data collection by wearing appropriate clothing, sharing the participants’ interests and conversation, listening to their stories, using suitable language when in contact with them and discussing experiences and problems that are of relevance to their lives. Indeed, Janesick recommends that strategies for gaining the trust of participants should begin as the researcher makes his or her earliest moves in the field [19]. If the researcher is in a position to stage preliminary meetings to address groups associated with the organisations in question – either staff or users – these may afford the investigator an ideal opportunity to make appropriate connections between his or her work, background, etc. and those of the potential informants. As Ely et al recognise, a relationship of trust and cooperation should be maintained throughout the fieldwork [20]. Where the research is of an ethnographic nature and the group under study is a disadvantaged section of society, the willingness of the investigator to become involved in community activities, to provide ongoing help to members of the community by applying his or her skills to their problems and situations or simply to offer “a listening ear” can be invaluable in encouraging individuals to come forward and contribute data voluntarily in their own time and over an extended period.

3.3. *Tactic three – Use of “incentives”*

The use of incentives may form an extension of the policy of reciprocity, which the researcher may have already employed to gain access to the organisations. A

variety of approaches may be taken, ranging from the payment of each informant to the automatic entry of all participants into a lucky draw, where a prize may be given to one or a limited number of individuals. Both approaches suffer from problems, however. The first is likely to be expensive financially and students, in particular, may find it impracticable, whilst the latter is clearly less costly to the researcher but the incentive may be inadequate for some prospective informants as they are not guaranteed to benefit. Especially where payment is offered, the danger also emerges that, in order to fulfil their part of the “bargain”, the informants feel obliged to tell the researcher what they believe he or she wishes to hear.

3.4. Tactic four – Emphasis on the value of personal contributions

Opportunities may be seized in preliminary meetings between the researcher and members of the organisations for the former to articulate to a wide audience the contribution that each individual can make to the work. Even if the possibility of providing some tangible incentive for the potential participants proves impossible, as Glesne and Peshkin note, “What you [as the researcher] do have that they value is the means to be grateful, by acknowledging how important their time, cooperation and words are; by expressing your dependence on what they have to offer; and by elaborating on your pleasure with their company” [21]. In many situations, such psychological benefits are not to be underestimated. Winning the trust of people in this way may play a major role in delivering what Janesick considers a key aim in qualitative research, namely to “capture the nuance and meaning of each participant’s life from the participant’s point of view” and to ensure that participants are “willing to share everything, warts and all, with the researcher” [22].

4. Permission from interested parties

Lincoln and Guba draw attention to a range of individuals, at different levels, whose cooperation must be secured for fieldwork to take place [23]. All concerned parties – gatekeepers of various types and prospective participants – should be provided with explanations of the work, with particular emphasis on its implications for them. If data is to be collected directly from, for example, those in care or youngsters aged under eighteen, not only will the researcher have to demonstrate that he or she has received a clear police check but he or she will also be likely to require express permission from those responsible for the individuals selected as research subjects. The need for this written interaction between the researcher and carers/parents does, however, afford the former an opportunity to present, in writing, an explanation of matters such as the nature of the work, the reasons for the researcher’s choice of organisation and the measures taken to ensure the least possible disruption. This information may be provided in a letter that includes a formal consent slip to be signed by the carer/parent, although, since Flick warns that too much information

may confuse rather than enlighten the reader [24], the extent of such explanation should be restricted to no more than is necessary. A similar approach may be adopted in relation to the selected individuals themselves. Each should be informed of the purpose of the work, in language appropriate to his or her status, ability level and age, and questions asked must be truthfully answered.

5. Conclusion

Even though the task of gaining access both to organisations and to willing informants within them remains a challenge for many qualitative researchers, a number of strategies have been developed that have frequently proved effective. With regard to the former, these include

- citing support from some “authority”, who/which has already backed the work;
- attempting to secure entry through a gradual process in which onerous demands are not made on gatekeepers immediately or too quickly;
- striking bargains enabling both parties to benefit from the project;
- dealing with the concerns of gatekeepers openly and honestly;
- emphasising any professional or personal links that exist between the researcher and the organisation;
- remaining receptive to advice from gatekeepers on how the fieldwork should proceed.

In many cases, gaining access to individual informants who are associated with the organisation can also prove problematic. Nevertheless, several of the tactics outlined above are again appropriate. In addition, an investigator may increase his or her prospects of success through

- adopting a policy of prolonged engagement with those in the organisation;
- blending in as far as possible with the prospective participants;
- offering incentives to entice individuals to take part;
- demonstrating both implicitly and explicitly the value of the contributions that informants might make to the study.

Clearly, ensuring some element of reciprocity is a key ingredient in several of the strategies that may be employed, in terms of securing both the participation of an organisation and the cooperation of prospective informants within it. In several instances, however, a further prerequisite to achieving access involves gaining the approval of a third party who is, in some way, responsible for the welfare of the informants. Even when all the necessary permissions have been gained, it should still be remembered that, especially where the fieldwork is prolonged, positive relationships between the researcher on the one hand and the organisation and informants on the other must be maintained.

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