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ARTICLE

Gaining and Maintaining Access

Exploring the Mechanisms that Support
and Challenge the Relationship between
Gatekeepers and Researchers

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ABSTRACT

Gatekeepers occupy increasingly important positions within qualitative social work research and their engagement with research is crucial to the ongoing development of a useable knowledge base. However, while some studies have hinted at the mechanisms that support and challenge the relationship between gatekeepers and researchers, there is a paucity of systematic research concerning how these relationships can be maintained more effectively for all concerned. This article aims to develop the literature in this respect by examining how researchers in the child and families research arena ($n = 13$) understand the mechanisms that support and challenge the engagement of gatekeepers. Several mechanisms that support engagement are identified. These are: political representation, civic and moral responsibility to engage, and the identification of good practice. Similarly, a number of mechanisms that can challenge engagement are also explored. These include: methodology, representation, intrusion, and, disruption. These results are discussed in relation to the current developments within the field of qualitative social work that have seen a rise in collectivized responses to research requests.

KEY WORDS:

access

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sampling

INTRODUCTION

While the term ‘gatekeeper’ can be used in a number of different ways, gatekeepers within the research process are typically described as the individuals, groups, and organizations that act as intermediaries between researchers and participants (De Laine, 2000). They do not provide the technical expertise to carry out research or the financial means to do so. Similarly, they are not ‘researched’ in themselves. Instead, they support the research process by providing an efficient and expedient conduit for access between researchers and participants.

However, the reasons why gatekeepers within the social work arena choose to support the research process have received little systematic attention within the literature. Further, the mechanisms that challenge any engagement are also apparent by their absence. Indeed, not all gatekeepers will agree to research requests and in some instances they may even attempt to block access. While many studies have hinted at what these reasons and mechanisms may be (see for example Emmel et al., 2007), there remains little research that is specifically designed to investigate these aspects of the researcher–gatekeeper relationship. Given the unprecedented levels of social research currently being undertaken, this paucity is surprising. If current engagement rates are to be maintained then a more systematic development of these mechanisms is likely to be crucial to the continuing development of the knowledge field. Establishing this knowledge is likely to be especially important for qualitative researchers working in the field of social work as they have to spend significant time and effort in order to generate useable data. Productive research relationships for all of the various stakeholders in the research process are essential to the success of the qualitative research enterprise.

Therefore, using data from a study that examined how researchers ($n = 13$) within the children and families research arena negotiated their research relationships, this article seeks to explore how researchers understand the motivations of gatekeepers who engage with the research process. It identifies some of the roles that researchers perceive to provide support and encourage engagement, as well as exploring a number of threats that they perceive to challenge this engagement. These results are then discussed in relation to the current developments that have seen a rise in the collectivized responses to research requests within the field of social care.

THE NATURE AND ROLE OF GATEKEEPERS

Using Network Exchange Theory to reveal the theoretical properties of a gatekeeper, Corra and Willer (2002) argue that a gatekeeper controls access to benefits that are valued by clients. These are benefits that clients do not ordinarily have

access to and gatekeepers operate as switchmen who actively decide whether clients can gain access to them. Applying this in the context of the research process, gatekeepers exist where the participants in question are not approached directly by researchers and instead an intermediary is used to facilitate access. According to De Laine (2000), for example, gatekeepers are those who have the power to grant or withhold access to people required for the purposes of research. Their role may be to allow researchers into a given environment, or it may go further in providing the necessary means to gain access in terms of support or backing for the research project. However, gatekeepers will remain largely independent to the participants of a research study and they will not directly provide the material that constitutes the information required for the data-collection phase of research (see Miller and Bell, 2002).

The variety of people, groups and organizations that can act as gatekeepers within the qualitative social work research field is huge. It can include schools (Heath et al., 2007), social service departments (Clark and Sinclair, 2008), health trusts (Horwood and Moon, 2003), practitioners and community groups (Tidmarsh et al., 2003), as well as the professionals, managers, and workers who are embedded within these institutions. What all these groups share, however, is the ability to provide a physical and social bridge for researchers (the client) to access research participants (the beneficiaries).

Researchers are often unable to bridge the gaps to research participants themselves for a number of reasons. They may not have the time or funding to develop links themselves, they may lack the specialist knowledge required to find participants, or they may lack the requisite identities to bridge these gaps (see Emmel et al., 2007). Equally, as Heath et al. (2007: 415) argue, it is much more efficient for a researcher to seek access to institutions where they are likely to find a large volume of potential participants, even where the topics that they are interested in have little relevance to that institution.

Cassell (1988) further articulates these difficulties of access by distinguishing between physical access and social access. Where physical access refers to the ability to make contact with the research group, social access is concerned with gaining social acceptance within the research group itself. In the first instance the gatekeeper is often in control of physical access to research participants and will give permission to proceed and provide the necessary information for contact to be made. Problematically, physical access does not ensure social access and having material contact with a group is not the same as being accepted by it (see Adler and Adler, 1987; Burgess, 1984; Wallis, 1977). Indeed, trust, rapport, and credibility are all frequently highlighted as being important in facilitating research relationships (see for example Sixsmith et al., 2003). Where there are pre-existing positive relationships between the gatekeeper and the research participants, these can be used (or exploited) by the researcher to facilitate the social access to the target participants. Gatekeepers not only offer a solution to

problems of contacting the research participants, but also a means of developing more productive research relationships with them.

However, Corra and Willer (2002) also highlight that in order to motivate gatekeepers to provide access, clients must pay some sort of fee. Therefore, ensuring the cooperation of gatekeepers within the research process is not necessarily a straightforward process and researchers may have to demonstrate that research engagement will be of benefit to the gatekeeper. These fees may include: assisting with service development, gaining representation, or, helping to develop staff skills (see Clark and Sinclair, 2008; see also Boddy et al., 2006). Similarly, if the costs to the gatekeeper in question are considered to be too high, access can be blocked. Horwood and Moon (2003) highlight how the researcher is external to the gatekeeper and as a result their presence constitutes a potential risk to that individual, group, or organization. The researcher is often a relatively uncontrolled element in an otherwise highly structured environment. Any non-positive outcomes for the gatekeeper, therefore, need to be assessed and negotiated if access is to be achieved. These may include legal concerns (Munro et al., 2005); issues of representation (Brewer, 1993); unwanted intrusions (Curran and Cook, 1993); concerns for the privacy of those engaged (Murray, 2005); and even harm to the gatekeeper or those associated with it (Kennedy Bergen, 1993).

At a more practical level, non-engagement may be explained on the more material levels of lack of time, resource, and disruption to the individual or organization. Din and Cullingford (2004), for example highlight how the community centres they approached declined to engage and cited the lack of resource and time as a reason. Similarly, Munro et al. (2005) argue how research engagement within social service departments is on top of, and not part of, workloads. Finding information, providing links, answering queries, and approaching the participants in question, can all divert resources away from the central aims of the organization in question. Moreover, where organizations act as gatekeepers, good lines of communication are often needed to ensure that staff are aware of the research project and researchers. Failure to give updated information can cause disruption for all concerned (see Clark and Sinclair, 2008).

Given the emphasis that qualitative techniques place on the meaning and understanding of social situations, qualitative social work research is particularly vulnerable to all these concerns. Indeed, developing productive research relationships is crucial to obtaining credible data. But all of this takes considerable time and effort, and without the support of key gatekeepers many qualitative projects would simply be unachievable. The success of the qualitative enterprise necessarily involves developing good relationships with research participants and, given the key role gatekeepers have in supporting the research process and bridging the gap between researchers and participants, the gatekeepers themselves.

To summarize, gatekeepers occupy an important position within the research process as they provide more efficient and expedient routes to participants that would otherwise be difficult to access. However, gatekeepers have their own priorities, aims, and interests. This does not necessarily include research engagement and engagement can be disruptive and costly to those who choose to support access. Gatekeepers can, therefore, also block access to the targeted participants. So, assuming gatekeepers are not completely altruistic, there must be some mechanisms that encourage their engagement. While some research does explore the problems and the effects gatekeepers can have on research (see France, 2004; Heath et al., 2007; Homan, 2001; Miller and Bell, 2002), little systematic research has been directed toward assessing the motivations for engagement, not to mention the reasons for non-engagement. Therefore, this article will attempt to explore how researchers perceive the roles of research engagement for gatekeepers and it will present the results from a study that, in part, explored how researchers understand the mechanisms that support the engagement of gatekeepers and the mechanisms that challenge engagement.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

These results are part of a broader empirical study that sought to explore how researchers negotiate and manage qualitative research relationships. The project involved collecting interview data from experienced researchers ($n = 13$) concerning their experiences of conducting research with people and organizations in the children and families research field. As a part of the project, researchers were asked to explore the relationships they had formed with gatekeepers.

To be considered for selection, prospective interviewees had to have conducted a recent research study that satisfied three basic criteria. First, they had to have conducted a study that was qualitative in nature, but not action-orientated. Second, the study had to be concerned with children and families in some respect, and third, prospective interviewees were asked to limit studies to those conducted between 2000 and 2005. Four methods were used to identify potential interviewees. This included searching electronic databases; searching databases of funded work; searching the outputs of research based organizations; and utilizing personal contacts known to have worked in the required areas.

All the researchers that were subsequently selected, and who agreed to be interviewed, were based within the broad range of arenas that social work researchers can find themselves in, or were working with particular participants that social work researchers can come into contact with. The studies also incorporated a broad range of gatekeepers that researchers operating within social work fields will frequently find themselves engaging with.¹ The final sample included researchers who had recently conducted research in social care

departments, as well as researchers working with trans-racial adoptees, the parents of 'disabled' infants, the families of disabled children from ethnic minority groups, children 'in trouble' with the education system, excluded teenagers, and single mothers. The gatekeepers that were involved in these projects included voluntary groups, local community organizations, educational institutions, health trusts, local authorities, as well as national organizations. Except where stated, researchers made reference to these gatekeepers as whole organizations rather than the particular individuals within them.

In order to establish a theoretical base, participants were interviewed in two phases. The initial sample included seven researchers with the emergent data analysed according to the constant comparative method outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This established a framework concerning how researchers understood the mechanisms that support engagement for gatekeepers, as well as the challenges to it. These issues were then pursued in another series of six interviews where researchers were partly selected in order to further articulate the emergent topics and to explore these with respect to different gatekeepers. However, the sample size is small and theoretical saturation was not achieved. Therefore, the study is considered to be intensive rather than extensive and further investigation is necessary in order to articulate how the mechanisms that support and challenge engagement vary across the types of gatekeeper.

REPRESENTATION, RESPONSIBILITY, AND CHANGE: THE ROLE OF RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT FOR GATEKEEPERS

Research engagement is non-compulsory and the people and organizations who act as gatekeepers have their own interests, aims and purposes in their wider social contexts. This does not necessarily include engagement with research. Indeed, the reasons why gatekeepers support the research process are not well articulated within the literature. This section explores why researchers think gatekeepers engage with research and examines the mechanisms that support engagement. Three mechanisms that support engagement are identified. These are: political representation; civic and moral responsibility to engage; and, the identification of good practice and the facilitation of change. Each of these mechanisms should be considered as an 'ideal-type' (see Weber, 1949) rather than being a discrete entity that is applicable in every case and to every gatekeeper. Indeed, the mechanisms are intended to summarize the main themes that researchers perceived as important in maintaining engagement across the gatekeepers they identified.

Political Representation

Gatekeepers have aims, purposes and interests that exist externally to their research involvement. This means that they hold certain values and assumptions

about particular areas of the social world at the expense of other values. For instance, a local memory group believe that remembering the local past of individuals and communities is a worthwhile pursuit and they will commit time, labour, and finance to achieving these ends.

One role of engagement for gatekeepers, therefore, is to represent their aims and interests. Supporting research ensures that these activities are both articulated and legitimated. Describing the politics of one of the voluntary groups she approached, one researcher was directly aware of their need to be recognized, and in many ways, have their struggle validated:

Because they feel . . . quite angry . . . [that] the mainstream statutory bodies, that have an obligation to provide education for these young people, [are] basically being let off the hook and not delivering on what they are supposed to deliver and leaving them, as voluntary organisations, and many of them were under-funded or funded for something else, having to fill the void that was created by this situation . . . they wanted that to be recorded and to be made known. They also wanted the plight of the young people and their families to be made aware of. They also wanted attention, or wanted some recognition, for the work that they were doing and also some recognition for the fact that they were filling this rather important void: in many cases with very little resources. So there is a sense in which for the community organisations there was a political element (with a small 'p') to what they were doing. (DV, 2005)

The research engagement was perceived to validate and recognize the work of the gatekeeper. Supporting the research process ensured that their views were represented within a wider context and helped the gatekeeper to document their situation. This process was then perceived to legitimate their aims, purposes and interests.

Civic and Moral Responsibility to Engage

Some gatekeepers were more likely to be perceived as receptive to research requests if they were perceived to have a duty to engage. For example this researcher noted:

I wrote to a historian at a cathedral and he put me in contact with somebody and that sort of introduced me into one network . . . I suppose, I would of thought . . . that employees of a cathedral would think that it wasn't very good manners to not reply(!) . . . (BT, 2005)

This responsibility to engage was reported to be part of a wider moral commitment 'to help', as in the above example, or as more of a formal commitment to the area. For example, another researcher described the motivations of engagement stemming from an established tradition of educational support:

they all, without exception, saw it as their moral responsibility to actually step in there and give assistance [to us] and this is not surprising because there's a history within the black community of self-help within the domain of education going back to the 60s when the supplementary schools were established in the major cities because of the disappointment. Supplementary schools are schools which are voluntarily run by community groups either within the context of the church or more broadly. The principle of a supplementary school is there to compensate for what is perceived to be the failings of the education system in terms of delivering support and, in some respects, the curriculum. So there is a tradition within the black community, it is part of the heritage it is part of the community, it is part of the cultural capital. So the issue of stepping in and giving support is part of that culture. (DV, 2005)

The level of support that was present within the community organization was perceived to provide the impetus for engagement because the project fitted into their broader commitment to the area. The gatekeeper was perceived to have a high level of moral responsibility to the topic of the research and this was seen to support their engagement.

In another case, a researcher described how the gatekeeper, in this example a school, was sympathetic to the research project because it resonated with a particular targeted area of interest that had been highlighted by the local education authority as being of interest:

the dreaded OFSTED inspectors had looked at the school systems, various ones around [place], and generally said that the schools were good in terms of curriculum and teaching quality. But, the two things that are problematic are that the buildings are lousy, generally, and that student behaviour is rather poor on occasions and that is seen as problematic from a number of stakeholder positions. So they were generally receptive to [the project]. (SD, 2005)

The project was perceived to have a role for the school because it addressed issues around those children who were in trouble within the education system. While most research was of limited interest to the school, the researcher perceived that the school had a civic responsibility to engage because of the contents of a local report that had identified a need for information in their particular locality.

The Identification of 'Good Practice' and the Facilitation of Change

Another role of engagement for gatekeepers that was reported by researchers was to identify 'good practice' that could then be used to facilitate change. The information that is generated by the research project is perceived as something that can be useful to the gatekeeper. Research engagement, therefore, helps them to fulfil their aims, purposes and interests with greater effect:

We were very clear about what were the aims of our research, and one of the main aims to re-inform practice and we presented this to parents was in a number of ways. So, one would be the dissemination and we would be trying to hit organisations like ‘contact a family’: ‘Here are our findings and this will feed into the support networks of parents’ and that was quite clear. But we were also quite clear that we wanted to inform professional practice, and again through some of the dissemination procedures we would be targeting that audience. (ID, 2005)

The gatekeeper, in this case a particular health service department and some of the associated supporting organizations, would benefit from the work the researchers were doing because the researchers had a specific commitment to local feedback. This would then help the health authority and the respective support organizations to achieve their aims and purposes to better effect. As the researcher went on to explain:

If you speak to professionals they say, ‘how do you tell a parent that their child is disabled, how do you break bad news?’ and we had a case where the parent was constantly saying, ‘why is it bad? It’s just news’ . . . So we feel sure that that has affected professionals in the way they work to varying levels. (ID, 2005)

The research identified better ways of communicating with parents and this information was fed-back to the professionals who could incorporate it into their practice. The engagement of the gatekeeping professionals was perceived to be facilitated by the increased capacity to achieve their primary aims.

METHODOLOGY, REPRESENTATION, INTRUSION, AND DISRUPTION: THE CHALLENGES TO ENGAGEMENT

Gatekeepers do not always choose to agree to research requests. As previously suggested, engagement is non-compulsory and gatekeepers can choose to decline involvement with the research process if they so wish. This section highlights a number of challenges that can threaten engagement. These include: methodology, representation, intrusion, and, disruption. Again, each of these challenges should be seen as an ‘ideal-type’ rather than being applicable to all cases and gate-keepers. Each is dealt with in turn.

Methodology

Value-based decisions about what are considered to be useful forms of knowledge are implicitly contained within any research proposal. However, methodological politics are not necessarily confined to researchers and funding agencies and some gatekeepers will also often value certain forms of knowledge over others. This is particularly true if the research project is perceived to help them

achieve their primary goals. According to some of the researchers in this sample, methodologies that are perceived as being more useful in achieving these goals are more likely to be favoured by the gatekeeper in question. For instance, within the field of health, where there is an emphasis on the perceived reliability, validity, and replicability of the scientific method and quantitative techniques more generally, some qualitative methods were perceived to be a threat to engagement by particular individuals within the gatekeeping organization:

we had a couple of professionals . . . who were quite dismissive of it. So when you started to talk about qualitative research, because it wasn't 'measuring stuff', they didn't see the merits of it. (ID, 2005)

Moreover, the implications of not using quantitative techniques were considered to be a threat to a perceived ability of the research to be 'objective':

we [were] working with [them] to identify 'good practice', and what is really interesting about that is that a number of people from the partner organisations said things like 'if you're not going to be objective, why bother?' And we were like, 'hang on, this is meant to be the kind of research where we work together!' For some people, identifying good practice or being partisan, or being alongside the insider, whatever that is, smelt like bias and lies, and they didn't quite see the validity of it. (ID, 2005)

In this example, the researcher was attempting to take a much more inclusive approach in order to produce outcomes that were more usable for those that they were working in partnership with. While these methods helped in achieving engagement with the gatekeeping organization due to an enhanced ability of the research to contribute toward their primary goals, the method also became a threat to engagement with some individuals within the organization who did not value the method of knowledge construction.

Representation

As demonstrated earlier, gatekeepers have political interests. They, just like researchers, make value judgements about the social world. Where political representation is important to the gatekeeper, then the gatekeeper needs to be sure that the researcher and the research project can represent a reality that is congruent to the one held by the group in question. If there is a perceived inability to do this then any agreements between the researcher and the gatekeeper can become unstable. For instance, this researcher noted:

[the gatekeeper had] had some previous experience of researchers and they found that they completely disagreed with their findings, and they had no means for come-back. So they had a very poor experience of research and were distrusting as a result. (US, 2005)

The representation of the findings offered by the previous researchers was not acceptable to the gatekeeper and as a result, any further research support was withdrawn due to their initial negative experience.

Intrusion

Related to these issues of representation, and even though the gatekeeper does not directly provide the data for the research, there is still the potential for intrusion. This occurs when the gatekeeper in question perceives the focus research project to be entering into areas of interest that they also have an interest in protecting and managing. For instance, one researcher described the process of attempting to gain access to disabled children:

Many black families haven't had very good experiences with service and there is also fear of bureaucracy interference and meddling by the state. So . . . there's a whole kind of background of mistrust in officialdom anyway . . . some of the studies families are afraid that their children will be taken away if the social worker comes to offer them a service partly because things are not explained enough. (SG, 2005)

More specifically, researchers highlighted that intrusion could become particularly problematic if the project is perceived as being critical toward the gatekeeper in question or if it threatens to reveal an area of practice that the gatekeeper does not want to be represented within the public domain. This does not, in itself, mean that the family, group or organization has something to hide that needs to be revealed, but does indicate an element of risk for the gatekeeper involved in that they can lose control of the representation of their reality.

Disruption: Costs and Efficiency

Research engagement is rarely financially reimbursed and any costs associated with engagement often have to be absorbed by the gatekeeper. If this cost is perceived to be sufficiently high to disrupt the accomplishment of the primary aims, purposes and interests of the gatekeeper in question then researchers recognized that there could be a threat to engagement. For example, this researcher recognized this difficulty in working with social service departments:

they have their own roles and obligations and the way they were looking at it was that it didn't matter that I was doing a [research project] and that I'd had all my training, all they looked upon was 'she's doing a bit of research and we're supposed to dig out these people for her to interview?' And I suppose it's more work for them and they weren't getting anything in return, so it was more hassle than it was worth. (SM, 2005)

The disruption and effort associated with engagement was perceived to be too high when considered alongside the benefits of that engagement. Indeed, this

researcher indicates that the disruption, and any associated costs, would be more likely to be tolerated if the project could have been shown to help the gatekeeper achieve their primary aims. Given the project was not perceived to be able to do this, a significant challenge to engagement followed.

This threat to engagement can also work in the opposite direction. Some researchers reported that decisions concerning which gatekeepers to engage were based upon practical concerns of efficiency. For instance, this researcher did not engage schools that were perceived as problematic in terms of their organization and current concerns:

we wanted not to choose schools that were in terrible trouble because we all had experience of doing educational research before and it's not a good idea: so [the schools] were relatively robust and were happy to have us in there. (SS, 2005)

The costs of utilizing a particular gatekeeper were perceived to outweigh the benefits so the researchers looked elsewhere for their participants. Even though consent had been granted, the perception of the school being 'in trouble' meant that the researcher was unwilling to engage with them. The emphasis the school placed on other priorities, a potential lack of organization and poor channels of communication, as well as a perceived lack of interest amongst staff, dissuaded the researcher from involving them.

Similarly, the following researcher based selection on the practical impact of the ethical procedures that were required by the gatekeeper:

well our position was that we didn't feel we should have to go to parents for consent and although we were happy to inform parents that it was happening and if they wanted to withdraw kids from it that was there, but we didn't feel it was a study that needed parental consent, so that was another criteria in which we selected schools. So if the schools said you have to get parental consent to do this . . . then they were out. (SS, 2005)

The ethical prescriptions that were required by the schools were perceived to be too cumbersome by the researcher who wanted to employ an opt-out approach rather than an opt-in one. An opt-in method, it was felt, would take too much time and result in a limited sample of parents actually responding to the call for participation. The costs of agreeing to these requests were seen to outweigh the benefits of using the school because it would result in a limited level of participation.

DISCUSSION

Hornsby-Smith (1993) argues that a simple exchange approach to the researcher–gatekeeper relationship is problematic as there are a large number of

factors that can facilitate engagement, as well as a number of factors that do not support it. These are not necessarily immediately tangible or even articulated by either the researcher or gatekeeper. For instance, any risk associated with engagement is not immediately tangible or applicable in every case. The perception of risk is highly subjective and what is perceived as a risky venture for one gatekeeper may not be considered risky for another (Lee and Renzetti, 1993). The baseline assessment exercise, for example, mapped the range of research that is conducted in social service departments within the UK and found a wide variety of different levels of research activity and willingness to provide access in what are similar environments with similar concerns (see for a review Boddy et al., 2006). Similarly, gatekeepers do not necessarily seek immediate gratification and engagement decisions are not necessarily made on straightforward rational calculations of benefit made by the gatekeeper (Hornsby-Smith, 1993).

Hence, the 'ideal-types' that are presented here are unlikely to be exhaustive of the complex processes that support and challenge engagement. Indeed, future research needs to explore the more specific issues involved in feed-back and dissemination which are not covered here but are likely to be important in the analysis of the researcher-gatekeeper relationship. Similarly, the needs and requirements of gatekeepers across different areas of the social care remit will vary considerably. Further investigation is necessary in order to more fully articulate the mechanisms that support and challenge engagement in these particular contexts.

Additionally, this article does not attempt to articulate the views of the gatekeepers that were involved in these studies. As a result, any perspectives are being filtered through the reflexivity of the researchers and future research needs to specifically explore gatekeeper viewpoints directly (see for instance Clark and Sinclair, 2008). The focus of the study also centred on projects where engagement with gatekeepers was not hugely problematic. All the projects were, broadly speaking, successful in terms of their research relationships and their desired outcomes. Cases where difficulties have been more noticeably encountered are likely to be revealing, particularly in terms of the challenges to engagement.

More research in all of these areas is likely to be particularly important for researchers working within qualitative social work research contexts. It is already apparent within the literature that without the co-operation of gatekeepers, research opportunities in the social care field would be limited due to the increases in time, expense and energy that are required to carry it out (Emmel et al., 2007). However, the findings presented here not only demonstrate the mechanisms by which gatekeepers decide who should, and who should not, be given access to potential research participants, they also begin to suggest how gatekeepers may seek to shape research engagements according to their needs. Indeed, Broadhead and Rist (1976) argue that the pivotal concern for the

gatekeeper is with the benefits that the research can offer the person or organization. In respect to the evidence presented here, the obligations that researchers may incur, however inadvertently, include political representation, the identification of 'good practice' and the facilitation of change, demands concerning methodology, as well as decreases in intrusion and disruption. While many of these issues are likely to be applicable to quantitative as well as qualitative research, the amount of time and involvement that qualitative methods require make them particularly sensitive to these issues. Indeed, the influence of gatekeepers in this regard is likely to become increasingly significant to researchers working within qualitative social work contexts.

For many years within the social work field, any decisions regarding engagement with research have been largely dependent upon the individual gatekeeper and often upon particular individuals within that particular group or organization. While some gatekeepers may have had specific procedures to support and control the research process, others have been less well developed. This has effectively meant that researchers can, and frequently do, select gatekeepers according to their needs and interests rather than fulfilling the requirements of a more demanding gatekeeper. Any demands that are seen as problematic from the perspective of the researcher can be negotiated by contacting other potential gatekeepers until they find one with less onerous requirements.² The ability of gatekeepers to shape research, has, therefore, been limited.

However, the introduction of standardized ethical regulations is changing this landscape. For example, in the UK the Research Governance Framework (RGF) (see Department of Health [DoH], 2001) and the resultant Implementation Plan for the RGF (see DoH, 2004) has meant that many gatekeepers within the social work field have had to alter their arrangements for research coordination and governance in line with a national framework. Indeed, the RGF "is aimed at continuous improvement of quality, and the reductions of unacceptable variations in research practice" (Boddy et al., 2006: 318). Therefore, many gatekeepers within the field that would have previously responded to any research requests individually, and were previously limited in their ability to gain fees, are now following standardized procedures. Responses to research requests are, in effect, becoming more collectivized and there is some evidence that a product of the RGF currently being applied within social care is a more uniform response to research requests from social work environments (Clark and Sinclair, 2008). Indeed, this is also likely to have some resonance with the experience of many qualitative researchers working under the gaze of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the USA (see for example Leisey, 2008). While some have argued that ethical regulations of this type are unethical (see Dingwall, 2006; see also Haggerty, 2004), as well as making research increasingly difficult and bureaucratic (see Reed, 2007; see also McDonach et al., 2009),

as gatekeepers become more aware of their responsibilities toward engaging with social care research, they are also increasingly likely to include the issue of usefulness and practical value of engagement within the criteria that they employ in deciding whether to facilitate external research (see Boddy et al., 2006; see also Clark and Sinclair, 2008).

These developments come at a time when calls to develop the knowledge-base within social care are growing (see Marsh and Fisher, 2005). Shaw and Norton (2007), for instance, have highlighted that much recent debate within the social work research community has been directed toward discussing how to develop both the knowledge and resource base within the discipline. As current levels of research activity within social care are likely to grow yet further, gatekeepers that are supportive of present and future engagements are, therefore, likely to be increasingly important to the development of the knowledge base.

The relative paucity of current research concerning how gatekeepers understand research engagement is, therefore, problematic as researchers need to be sympathetic to the interests and needs of gatekeepers in order to maintain current levels of research. Indeed, the growth of collectivized responses to research requests enhances the capacity of gatekeepers to influence and shape the research process according to their needs. This shift to a structural advantage in favour of gatekeepers may limit the type and nature of research that is supported – particularly as projects that do not resonate with the interests of gatekeepers may be unwelcome.

As a result, developing a more systematic understanding concerning the issues presented in this article is necessary in order to understand the mechanisms that support and challenge engagement throughout the research process, and to consider the impact of these mechanisms on any research that is conducted. A better understanding of these mechanisms can help to reveal how research engagement can be better maintained in both local and national arenas, as well as helping to assess the validity of that research. If qualitative research within social work is to continue at its current levels, the development of this work is likely to be essential to the continuing success of the research enterprise and a wider, and more inclusive, knowledge base.

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Notes

- 1 Thanks to one anonymous reviewer for highlighting the similarity of this approach with the sampling method of maximum variation as articulated by Quinn-Patton (2002).
- 2 This is, of course, only if the field has not already been saturated with research requests. Previous experience of research engagement can influence future decisions concerning whether to engage or not. Sanghera and Tharpar-Björkert (2007), for example, have documented how research fatigue can lead to gatekeepers denying access to research participants due to negative or indifferent experiences of previous research engagements (see Clark, 2008).

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