SAGE researchmethods cases

Gatekeepers: People Who Can (and Do) Stop Your Research in Its Tracks

Abstract

People who can provide or deny access to research participants are known as 'gatekeepers'. In my 30 years as a researcher, I have learned that gatekeepers have a variety of motivations and strategies to block (or facilitate) research. This case describes several research projects where gatekeepers have played a pivotal role, and what I have learned from each gatekeeper encounter. Lessons learned include how to plan research to minimize the potential for gatekeeping and what to do when gatekeepers unexpectedly block your research.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should

- Identify the main types of gatekeeping behaviors
- Understand the motivations behind gatekeepers' actions
- Be able to identify potential gatekeeper motivations in the development of a research plan
- Describe strategies to avoid or minimize the effect of gatekeepers in research

Introduction

My very first research project, conducted for my Master's degree, was the hardest thing I have ever done. I stumbled from one problem to another, the most notable of which was my first encounter with a research gatekeeper.

According to the literature, people who can provide or deny access to research participants are known as 'gatekeepers' (Kawulich, 2011). There are two main types of gatekeepers. Formal gatekeepers are people with the official power to give or withhold permission to undertake research. These include internal review board (IRB)/ethics committee members, heads of various agencies, and service providers who have the power to grant or withhold permission for you to conduct your research.

Informal gatekeepers are not in an official position where they can refuse a request to conduct research, but, nonetheless, they are able to hinder the progress of a research project (Wanat, 2008). Now, 30 years since my first encounter with a gatekeeper, I have learned several strategies to avoid having research disrupted by gatekeepers.

Things the Textbooks Don't Tell You

A major contributor to my Master's research difficulties was that I had a distinctly unhelpful research advisor. At this time, Google and the Internet were yet to be invented, so I was forced

to rely on various research methods textbooks. These texts provided excellent guidance on how to conduct research, so I was genuinely surprised when things didn't turn out the way I expected. What the textbooks and I had neglected to appreciate was the ubiquitous 'human factor' of social research.

My Master's research question was, 'what characteristics of teacher feedback do nursing students find the most effective in the clinical area?' I developed a questionnaire that asked nursing students in their final year about how feedback was provided (such as, 'in front of the patient', 'following patient care' and so on). I then had one question that asked students to rate on a scale from 1 to 7 how effective that clinical teacher was as a clinical teacher. My plan was to run a correlation to identify the aspects of feedback that were most strongly related to clinical teacher effectiveness.

However, there was a near-fatal flaw in my sampling plan. I noticed that in published research on clinical teacher effectiveness, researchers asked participants to think about their 'most effective' teacher and answer the questions about this single individual. However, it seemed to me that this created a potential sampling bias. My thinking was that if one student thought a teacher was effective, most other students would also think the same teacher was good; and this opened up the possibility that if I asked students to think about their most effective clinical teacher, they would all write about the same person. This meant that my research would more or less end up being about the characteristics of one very effective teacher.

So I came up with what promised to be a brilliant solution. I would ask the students (who would be anonymous) to rate their *current* clinical teacher (who would also be anonymous). I would have no way of knowing who the students were or who their clinical teachers were. I saw this as an effective way to avoid sampling bias and to collect data about anonymous clinical teachers who would span the continuum from highly effective to possibly not very effective at providing feedback to students. In total, there were about 400 potential participants (students) from two different universities who would be reporting on about 50 or so clinical teachers. This was more than enough for the statistics I planned.

In order to ensure there was no double-reporting of a particular teacher, data collection had to be undertaken as a one-off event. The IRB provided me with approval to approach students en masse during a lecture, explain my research, distribute the questionnaires and then have a third party collect the completed questionnaire (so my presence would not apply any pressure on the students to complete the questionnaires). I received written permission from the heads of the only two nursing schools in the state, and held meetings with the clinical teachers, explaining my research.

During one meeting with the clinical teachers, I found out that they had been instructed by a senior academic to warn their students that I was seeking to dig up 'dirt' on this university, and to tell them that they should not complete the questionnaires. This lecturer's actions invalidated my entire research project. Since ethical approval was granted on the condition that I would *not* be able to identify which university the data came from, I needed completed questionnaires from students at both universities to pool prior to data entry. If I only had data from one university, of course I would know which university it was. I was ethically bound to collect data from two universities, and one of the only two available universities had been contaminated by the actions of a single, powerful lecturer. I hid in the ladies' restroom in tears, where a secretary stumbled across me, and offered me a cup of tea and a comforting ear.

There was nothing in the research methods textbooks that was remotely helpful. The only solution I could come up with was to wait for a new batch of 'uncontaminated' students and hope that the same thing wouldn't happen again. To my great relief, the secretary unofficially phoned me with the information that the lecturer who had blocked my data collection was out sick, and a replacement lecturer had been arranged for the following day. I contacted this lecturer, and she was happy to give me 5 minutes to distribute the questionnaires. I arranged for a staff member from that university's administration to collect the completed questionnaires and forward them to be pooled with those from the other university. In the end, things turned out okay, thanks only to the decency of a secretary. I had been very, very lucky.

It took me quite a while to figure out that the genesis of this near-catastrophe was my failure to take human nature into account. The lecturer who had contaminated my participants didn't want students in her school completing questionnaires about their teachers' effectiveness, even though she had been briefed about safeguards that would ensure that a particular student, teacher, or university could not be identified. However, because her head of school had already given permission for me to collect data, she could not directly refuse my request. Instead, she officially agreed to cooperate and then secretly tried to prevent me from collecting data. She was an 'informal' gatekeeper.

My experience of 30 years ago is not uncommon. Wanat (2008) describes gatekeeper teachers in her study who erroneously thought the research was a means for administration to 'check up on us [teachers]', and ordered researchers to leave the classroom. My current PhD students also still face this type of informal gatekeeping. It appears that there are nearly endless opportunities for gatekeeping, such as the ones that have emerged with the advent of online data collection.

Why Shoot the Messenger When You Can Shoot the Message?

One of my PhD students wanted to email a questionnaire to every clinical teacher in Australia, using software that uploaded responses automatically into the SPSS statistics program. This software promised a huge sample size and no long hours of data entry. Both the student and I were complete novices at this, so we mapped out a couple of potential strategies. The first was to go to every web page of every university, and copy and paste the email address of every academic staff member who met the research inclusion criteria. We estimated that this method would require collating the email addresses of around 3,540 individuals, so this idea was shelved in favor of emailing heads of schools and asking them to forward the invitation email, which contained a link to the questionnaire, to their staff. There were 118 such heads of school. Our ethics officer deemed this plan was ethically acceptable, and it would be appropriate to send one reminder in the event of no reply or acknowledgment from a head of school. We were to interpret a lack of response or action after this reminder as a formal denial of access.

Only 43 of the 118 heads of school forwarded the email link on to their clinical teaching staff. A reminder email was sent to the heads of school who did not respond to the first email, and an additional 17 heads of school forwarded the email on to their clinical teaching staff. The total response rate of these gatekeepers was 50.8%, which is disappointing given that the request only required the heads of school to paste in their pre-existing group list of academic staff, and forward the email by hitting the 'send' button.

At this point, the glittering promise of hordes of participants and automatic data entry started to fade. Unlike my personal encounters with potential gatekeepers in the 1980s, we lacked the means to find out why so many formal gatekeepers declined to forward the email to their staff. My guess is that some gatekeepers genuinely didn't get around to it, some didn't want to burden their staff and some saw their role as a formal gatekeeper rather than as a conduit for an invitation to staff to participate in research (as we intended). Whatever the reason, it seems that the use of technology is as subject to gatekeeping as much as traditional paper-and-pencil data collection methods.

Avoiding Gatekeepers

The good news is that with an understanding of why people can feel threatened by research that is objectively non-threatening, research becomes a lot easier. For example, in my own PhD research, I was interested in how children who have obscure physical impairments (e.g. 'clumsiness') get diagnosed when they have physical and emotional needs that most health practitioners would erroneously deem 'minor'. (These children tend to have self-esteem issues that emerge, not unexpectedly, during the first year of school.) The obvious site for conducting

for this research was the psychology department of a university at which a famous professor studied the cognitive processes of clumsy children, so I decided to enter a doctoral program there. However, the postgraduate coordinator at the department didn't want to enroll me because in his opinion as a gatekeeper, my MPhil from the health science department was not as good as an MPhil from his psychology department. He stipulated that I should undertake an undergraduate honors degree in psychology to prove my worthiness to enroll in his department. I politely thanked him for his time and walked across the football oval to the school of sports science where a remedial program for clumsy children was offered. The head of school welcomed both me and my Master's qualification, and I enrolled in a PhD program.

I asked the professor who was running the program to be my research supervisor, although her biomechanical expertise had little relevance to my psychosocial research. My aim was to have a research supervisor who had a personal incentive to facilitate my access to participants. My success in completing a PhD would be a feather in her cap, so we had a mutual vested interest in the progression of my research.

Research involving children is complicated by the fact that both parents and children are required to provide informed consent, which doubles the opportunity to lose a potential child from research. In addition, according to several of the parents to whom I talked, children in the program were already 'over-researched' and the parents were loathe to subject their children to further 'lab rat' status. I realized that these parents were another type of gatekeeper, and this realization informed my next research decision. Rather than researching their children, which would be resisted by parents, I decided to do my research on parents who were raising a clumsy child.

I found an avalanche of parents who wanted to be involved. They had all suffered because they knew that something was wrong with their child, and they were being repeatedly fobbed off by various health and educational professionals who could not understand why these parents were so concerned about apparently healthy children. I ended up conducting more interviews than I needed because of the intensity of the parents' need to validate their experiences with someone who understood how hard it was to have one's concerns about a child's suffering repeatedly discounted.

Legitimate Gatekeepers

The parents in my PhD research were my first experience of what I viewed as 'legitimate gatekeepers'. The parents were genuinely concerned about protecting their emotionally vulnerable children from the objectifying effects of being a research 'subject'. The typical

research at that time required a clumsy child to wear only a bathing suit, and run and jump while being filmed. The film would later be analyzed to identify biomechanical patterns. This was embarrassing for children who were already self-conscious enough about how their bodies moved. Although the parents supported research which would help clumsy children, they felt that involvement in more than one such study was not in the child's best interests, and they resisted multiple requests to volunteer their child for further PhD research. These parents' gatekeeping was motivated by the need to protect their children from embarrassment rather than to simply block research, although the end result was the same for the researcher.

This phenomenon has also been reported by other researchers. Wanat (2008) investigated situations in parents' lives that limited their involvement in their child's schooling. The superintendent of a school district supported this project and requested that school principals provide the researcher with names of potential parents who were not involved at their children's schools. Some principals refused to cooperate, concerned that time-poor, single working parents would be falsely labeled as 'uncaring' parents.

Ethics committees are formally tasked with protecting vulnerable people, although it seems that their increasing focus is on risk management for the institution (Ahern, 2012). However, even when ethics committees require modifications to a research plan in order to safeguard vulnerable populations ('legitimate' gatekeeping), they can be mistaken about the potential for harm. White and Hardy (2008) describe how gatekeepers can deny researchers access to palliative care patients in order to avoid upsetting the dying person, which actually denies the patient meaningful engagement as an individual who is living with a terminal illness. Similar attitudes have been reported of gatekeepers in aged care residences (Bailey, Baker, Spassiani, & Meisner, 2012).

This is what makes gatekeeping in research so complex. I have encountered formal gatekeepers who demonstrate their genuine concern for the well-being of participants; I have also been confused by formal gatekeepers who provide formal support while concurrently engaging in informal blocking. I have also encountered another type of gatekeeper, one which does not seem to appear in the literature. This is the 'inadvertent' gatekeeper who does not fit into the formal/informal dichotomy or the genuinely protective 'legitimate' category described above. I encountered 'inadvertent' gatekeepers in two separate research projects.

Inadvertent Gatekeepers

The phenomenon of inadvertent gatekeepers seems to be related to participant action research (PAR). The philosophy underpinning PAR is that people who do not have a background in

research partner with an experienced researcher to investigate solutions to 'real-life' problems. My first foray into PAR entailed collaboration with teachers who wanted to publish a paper from research on curriculum in which we had been involved. I transcribed interviews and invited my co-investigators to analyze data with me and learn about qualitative analysis. After several failed attempts to get very busy professionals together to workshop the analysis, I completed the analysis and wrote a draft paper, leaving my three coauthors to provide insights regarding the discussion and recommendations.

However, the teacher-researchers were genuinely too busy to spend the amount of time required to complete the paper, so in the end I chose not to complete the paper as a sole author, and filed it away unpublished. My reasoning was that a sole authored paper was not in keeping with the philosophy of PAR. The teachers wanted to learn analysis and writing for publication, but I think they did not fully appreciate the amount of time and effort these activities entailed. As such, they were unable to contribute to a process where their contribution was essential, and thus they became inadvertent gatekeepers to the dissemination of the research.

A similar situation occurred recently when a group of community social workers wanted to undertake research to evaluate a new group-therapy program they had developed. The program consisted of six sessions provided once a week for 6 weeks. I created a questionnaire and obtained IRB approval. The plan was for the social workers to hand out the questionnaires to group members at the end of every session. We planned that I would enter and analyze the data, and we would collaborate to write a report and publication. However, as a result of funding cutbacks leading to loss of several key staff, along with one social worker's taking parental leave, the questionnaires were distributed to participants in what can be described as a haphazard fashion. Some weeks, the questionnaires were not distributed. At other times, participants were not reminded to put their unique identifier number on the questionnaires so I could not match 'Jane's' week 3 data to her week 1 and 2 data. As a result, whole batches of completed questionnaires were effectively useless.

No matter how many times I met with my co-investigators to stress how important it was to be methodical and thorough in the collection of data, the result was a very unsatisfactory percentage of missing data. It seemed that the people who wanted to do this research did not recognize how important a complete set of data was to the validity of the findings. They had become inadvertent gatekeepers with respect to the collection of good quality data, mainly because their focus was on the clients in front of them, rather than the relatively mundane task of distribution and collection of questionnaires for some abstract use in the future.

My personal solution to the problem of PAR-related inadvertent gatekeepers was to decide not

to undertake any more PAR projects. I find it almost impossible to reconcile the philosophical demands of shared responsibility intrinsic to PAR with the methodological demands of what I consider good research practice. To some extent, I attribute my adherence to by-the-book procedures to the fact that I literally learned about research methods from research methods texts during my MPhil, and I am genuinely confused about how to achieve the dual imperatives of procedural rigor and genuine lay 'co-researcher' engagement. My advice is that if you are thinking about engaging in PAR, talk with a researcher who has more skill and success with it than I have, and develop a plan to prevent inadvertent gatekeeping.

Serendipity and Gatekeeping

The previous sections might give the impression that gatekeepers' main function is to block research, and to some extent this is true. Even the term 'gatekeeping' suggests an action that is the opposite of 'holding a door open' for someone.

However, not all my gatekeeping experiences have been negative, although the positive experiences do seem to be more in the realm of good luck than good planning. The first example of serendipity in gatekeeping that comes to mind is the secretary who went to considerable effort to chase me down and give me vital piece of gatekeeper-busting information that saved my Master's research.

I experienced a second example of serendipity when I was trapped between the demands of an inadvertent gatekeeper and a moral imperative. The moral imperative related to research with indigenous people, in this case Aborigines in remote Australia. Mutual respect and trust are essential precursors to doing quality research with this group, and this generally takes months or years to establish. In addition, many indigenous people believe that research should be carried out by insiders, not outsiders (Kawulich, 2011), and I agree with this view. In my opinion, indigenous people are the gatekeepers of indigenous culture and by extension, indigenous research. I, as an outsider, must follow the lead of indigenous people regarding what and how to research.

Years ago, I was recruited by a headhunter to conduct qualitative research that would inform a larger, multidisciplinary research project and ultimately a very large collaborative grant application on the health of indigenous Australians. I was the only researcher with qualitative research experience, but I knew next to nothing about how to conduct research with Aborigines in a culturally sensitive manner. I spent 6 months reading everything I could get my hands on about indigenous culture, and when I felt I understood the major issues relevant to my role of researcher, I made contact with a community worker who worked in the region. She arranged

for me to meet the elders in the community in which she worked as soon as the research team flew in.

However, my senior co-investigator, who had no qualitative experience, told me to simply do a few quick interviews of the 'westernized' health workers and academics who were, by and large, his colleagues. I felt that this seemed like the sort of tokenism indigenous people found particularly offensive, and I tried to explain to him why I intended to purposively identify indigenous participants including patients and family members in addition to indigenous health workers. My senior co-investigator told me in no uncertain terms that I was not acting as 'a research assistant should' and to follow his instructions.

This was the first time I became aware that my co-researcher considered me to be a research assistant rather than a co-investigator with specialization in qualitative research. I was trapped between a formal gatekeeper who didn't understand the significance of what he was demanding, and a moral imperative to conduct culturally sensitive, rigorous qualitative research. I chose the latter and followed my original research plan, knowing that I was walking away from a career-enhancing research collaboration. It was a heartbreaking decision.

Word got around the indigenous community that I had stood up to a powerful university professor in defense of indigenous sensitivities, and that this had made me an outsider to the White power hierarchy. Ironically, I now had something in common with the indigenous people who had 200 years' experience of being on the receiving end of mistreatment by powerful White people. As a result, the participants I interviewed were incredibly open with me and referred me to powerful and wise indigenous elders whom I would normally never have been able to access. Completely by accident, I had become part of a social system that accepted me (Mandel, 2003), and this was very beneficial to the research.

The lesson I learned from this experience was that if potential gatekeepers can see that a researcher is knowledgeable and respectful of potential participants, they are more likely to give access to vulnerable people. Similarly, Walker and Read (2011) describe how a researcher who was a former staff member of a hospice was granted access to dying patients because the chief executive officer knew that the individual would deal with vulnerable hospice patients with sensitivity and respect.

Conclusion

When I was doing my MPhil, I hated research because it felt like an endless maze of blind alleys. However, once I figured out that human nature is *always* a variable in research, everything fell into place. The following are strategies that have helped me in negotiating with,

around, over, or despite gatekeepers in research.

Things to Consider When Designing Your Research Project

- Identify possible 'human factor' variables and design participant recruitment strategies to minimize gatekeeper opportunities to impede your research (White & Hardy, 2008).
- When presenting the aims of your research, you may need to describe them in terms of the gatekeeper's interests. In IRB/ethics and funding applications, the need for the research is generally presented as a 'problem' or 'gap' in some area. If you present your research to potential participants as addressing a 'problem', the person who is responsible for the 'problem' is unlikely to welcome your research.
- Design your research so that there is a benefit to gatekeepers. People are more likely to cooperate if there is a benefit for them.
- Don't automatically assume that because your research might benefit service providers or clients that either group will agree to your research. Build multiple options for data collection into your research project so that if one option fails, your research isn't doomed. *Always* have a backup plan to acquire data.
- Keep it simple. Complex research with less participant inconvenience is more acceptable to gatekeepers than complex research with much inconvenience (White & Hardy, 2008).
- I prefer my research students (who have strict completion deadlines) not to choose a topic with 'vulnerable participants' such as minor children, indigenous groups, and people with a mental illness because potential gatekeeper issues can bog down research for months. I can afford delays of months or years whereas research students or postdocs generally cannot.

Strategies for Gatekeeping That Emerges During Your Research

- There are many ways of saying 'no', and most of them contain a 'yes'. If people start requesting more and more letters/documents, if they keep forgetting to do as they promised, or if it is increasingly difficult to make appointments with key people, it is time to consider Plan B.
- If you think a gatekeeper might block your research and there is no way to avoid this, present yourself as a 'learner' whom they might want to help.
- Relate to participants as people. If you are a teacher, for example, you might gain cooperation from teacher participants if you explain that you are a member of the profession who is investigating a specific aspect of teaching. If you are a parent and are researching parents or children, this generally brings readymade rapport.
- Not all gatekeepers are bad. Talk to an approachable gatekeeper and try look at their

objections from their perspective. They might have genuine concerns for potential participants, which you need to take into consideration.

- If gatekeepers are determined to block your research, there is nothing you can do to change that. Accept that you have no control over the feelings and actions of other people, and modify your research plan (no matter how unjust this seems).
- Consider using the 'borrowed authority' of your research supervisor/advisor and request that they approach a gatekeeper on your behalf.
- Unless you are independently wealthy, few things are worth losing your job over. Try to figure out a way to do the right thing without aggravating the people with formal power.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever deliberately blocked someone from doing something, or have you ever been blocked by someone else? Describe the circumstances and feelings that contributed to these gatekeeping experiences.

2. Imagine that you are planning research which includes interviews of convicted drug addicts in prison:

    Who are potential formal gatekeepers? What reasons would they have to deny you access to these participants?

    What would you include in your research plan to address possible concerns of formal gatekeepers?

    Who are potential informal gatekeepers and why might they want to block your research?

    List the 'legitimate' reasons why an *informal* gatekeeper might restrict your access to the prisoners (i.e. what protections do you think the participants might need?).

    What personal characteristics of a researcher would be helpful in overcoming formal and informal gatekeeper resistance to your research?

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