

Defenders against Threats or Enablers of Opportunities: The Screening Role Played by Gatekeepers in Researching Older People in Care Homes

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This paper emerges from a case study of the system of statutory reviews in older people's care homes in the UK. Informed by a review of selected literature on gaining access, this paper provides a critical account of the process of negotiating access with gatekeepers (chiefly, care home managers). The negotiations were time-consuming and largely fruitless in terms of actually gaining access to care home residents. Nevertheless, much was learned about the field, in particular, about the attitudes of those with responsibility for caring for older care home residents. The residents in care homes became "hard to reach" research subjects not necessarily because of any cognitive or communicative impairments on their part, but by the defensive attitudes adopted by gatekeepers. It concludes by suggesting that, in this case, the ambiguous shades of meaning conveyed by the concept of "screener" make it a more appropriate term to describe the role than that of "gatekeeper". **Key Words:** *Access, Care Homes, Field Negotiations, Gatekeepers, Older People, Case Study.*

The field discovers itself when the research project enters the scene (Wolff, 2004, cited in Flick, 2009, p. 108)

In England, older care home residents funded by their local authority need to have their placement reviewed annually. As a social worker I occasionally assisted older people in admission to care homes and also conducted care homes reviews myself. I felt these were often highly proceduralised exercises mostly done for bureaucratic reasons. However, I have also experienced the statutory review process as a relative in another local authority whilst my father was in a care home. One key observation, at that time, was how, despite their best efforts, it was difficult for the reviewer to come in, usually as a stranger, and to get to know the older person properly and understand fully the older person's circumstances. Therefore, the conditions in which care home reviews usually took place, brief encounters often involving people who didn't know each other, presented challenges to both reviewer and older person alike. Both sets of experience made an impression on me; particularly the issues of how to make the older person's involvement in their own review a meaningful experience. I finished practising as a social worker in 2003 in order to teach social policy and social work in a higher education institution. Soon afterwards I commenced a doctorate.

Against the wider context of the emerging agenda of older people's participation in the UK (Barnes, 2005), the broad aim of the research was to gain an understanding of how older people experienced the review; what meaning(s) they attached to it, whether,

for example, they felt it was of any value to them, and to compare their perspective with that of others involved, for example, the local authority review officer, relatives, care home staff and so on. Key research questions focused on the extent to which the older person was meaningfully involved in their own review, how their participation was facilitated and their “voice” heard and recorded. The concept of “street-level bureaucracy” (Lipsky, 1980) was adopted to provide a useful conceptual lens through which to understand the extent to which practitioner practices differed in this respect. The original project was designed around the use of a range of qualitative methods; observation, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. I intended to observe a small number of reviews, interview the participants and then analyse the review paperwork in order to discover how the older person had been both involved and represented in the review.

After two early successes using personal contacts, recruiting further local authority care managers who were willing to be observed conducting a review became frustratingly slow and, despite repeated efforts, after three observations, the supply of volunteers effectively dried up—well short of the eight to ten originally hoped for. As a consequence, I decided to refocus the project into a case study using the data already collected and collecting additional interview data from different stakeholders who had some form of involvement in the care home review system. I felt that this necessarily iterative step would not only maintain the integrity of the research (Yin, 2010) but would also help to develop a better understanding of the broader context in which care home reviews took place. The stakeholders included senior managers within the local authority, locality team managers, a Care Quality Commission (CQC) care home inspector, care home managers, relatives and so on. Thus, it became possible to gather multiple perspectives both on what the purpose of reviews was and also on how the review system was operating. This provided several interesting insights into the different ideas about what reviews were for and how they be conducted. To acknowledge the subtle change of focus, the research was re-titled “A case study into the statutory review system in one local authority”. The combination of the review observation data, the diverse range of interview data, the documentary data, together with other contextual information, proved to be very satisfactory for generating ‘thick’ description, allowing for a fine-grained analysis of the system. However, taken as a whole, there was still a noticeable gap in the data: contributions from older people who had actually experienced a statutory review. It was decided to identify more participants who came into this category and interview them. Doing this would, to some extent, help return the study to something close to its original focus.

However, it is practically impossible to know who, in a care home, has recently had a statutory review without the assistance of gatekeepers in one of either two organisations—locality teams (being the ones responsible for actually carrying out reviews) or the care homes themselves. The article that follows provides a critical account of the process of negotiations with gatekeepers in care homes. It is hoped that, in doing so, researchers facing similar challenges, particularly those relatively early in their research careers, can be encouraged to persevere, adapt and not take such difficulties as a sign of personal failure but more as an opportunity to reflect and learn from the experience. The paper therefore concludes by suggesting that whilst the negotiations were time-consuming and mainly fruitless in terms of gaining access to care home

residents, nevertheless, a good deal was learned about the field, in particular, the marginalised position of older care home residents and the attitudes of those with responsibility for caring for them. The residents in care homes became “hard to reach” research subjects not necessarily because of any cognitive or communicative impairments on their part, but by the defensive and, ultimately, exclusionary attitudes adopted by many gatekeepers. The paper concludes by suggesting that the multiple and ambiguous shades of meaning conveyed by the concept of “screener” make it a more appropriate term to describe the role performed by the care home managers than that of gatekeeper.

Access in the Qualitative Research Literature

Morrill, Buller, Buller, and Larkey (1999) state that: “Gaining access to field settings occupies venerable territory in discussions about qualitative methods” (p. 51). However, Brown, Guillet de Monthoux, and McCullough (1976) observe that, in general, problems of access in qualitative research are much more complex and confused than anyone would infer by reading the literature of completed studies. In a similar vein, writing about the challenge of conducting fieldwork in organisations, Buchanan, Boddy, and McCalman (1988) observed

It is now widely accepted that research accounts in academic journals depart considerably from the research practices of their authors. They offer instead a “reconstructed logic” ... which brings the illusion of order to what is usually a messy and untidy process. (p. 54)

Therefore, whilst, traditionally, a feature of certain ethnographic studies, discussion of access issues has received variable coverage in the broader qualitative research literature (See Brown et al., 1976; Buchanan et al., 1988; Morrill et al., 1999; Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003; Wolff, 2004; and Sveen, Sarriegi, & Gonzalez, 2008, for how this topic has developed). Interestingly, the ways in which access discussions have tended to be framed have undergone changes in emphasis over time (Wolff, 2004; Flick, 2006; Sveen et al., 2008). For example, Van Maanen and Kolb (1985; cited in Bryman, 1988) comment that: “Gaining access to most organizational settings is not a matter to be taken lightly but one that involves some combination of strategic planning, hard work, and dumb luck” (p. 17).

This appears as a reasonable observation to make, but nevertheless, implies a linear stage process during which, after waiting for some time, slowing building trust and experiencing some “false starts”, the researcher will “get there in the end” and the project will eventually be underway. Indeed, Sveen et al. (2008) argues that questions of access in qualitative studies have mostly been regarded as problems of field relations—for example, how to overcome mistrust and establish rapport. This view does not quite reflect the full reality of the “messy and untidy” process referred to earlier. Several writers (for example, Buchanan et al., 1988 and, more recently, Wanat, 2008; Reeves, 2010) have stressed the difference between obtaining formal access and actually making any meaningful progress once “in”. There can, for example, be factors about certain fields where the difficulties in gaining effective access go beyond solving relational problems. In this view, solving the access problem becomes much more of a complex,

recursive and ongoing process. Wolff (2004) claims that, in fact, the task is never completed and cautions that:

It would be an error in dealing with the “way into the field” to think in terms of a fixed boundary, the crossing of which provides the researcher with an open and unrestricted view of the interior of the field. (p. 195)

Access to Organisations

Wolff’s (2004) point is particularly relevant in researching organisations. For example, a researcher might not be able to establish a good rapport with a gatekeeper for personal reasons and that might affect the progress of the project. However, they might build an excellent relationship with a gatekeeper, only to find themselves blocked by some other part of the system over which that gatekeeper either has no control or the fact that they do have control, itself, causes problems—for example, in manager-worker relations.

Access issues are therefore generally more complex in research involving organisations (Flick, 2006; Morrill et al., 1999; Wanat, 2008; Wolff, 2004). On a practical level, organizations present a more complex access challenge. Reasons for this include the fact that there can be multiple gatekeepers operating at different levels (Mulhall, 2003) and that an outsider, ignorant of organisational roles, structures and systems, might well struggle to identify exactly who they need to deal with. As Sveen et al. (2008) observe

The gatekeeper guards and restricts access to informants. He or she may be a top- or mid-level manager in an enterprise or a social worker in a recovery programme for crack addicts. Convincing a gatekeeper facilitates access to other informants. Larger organizations may have several gatekeepers at different levels... Sometimes there is no central gatekeeper, but rather each person is his or her own gatekeeper, with no or little influence over other gatekeepers. (p. 4)

In addition to practical reasons, Flick (2006) argues that there are systemic reasons why access seekers might be met with resistance by organisations. This is because

Research is a disturbance, and it disrupts routines, with no perceptible immediate or long-term pay off for the institution and its members. Research unsettles the institution with three implications: that the limitations of its own activities are to be disclosed; that the ulterior motives of the “research” are and remain unclear for the institution; and finally, that there are no sound reasons for refusing research requests. (p. 116)

It should therefore not be assumed that, once identified and approached; organisational gatekeepers will actually facilitate research requests. Wolff (2004) believes that such

gatekeepers serve an important function in controlling rather than enabling access. He states

They (gatekeepers) have at their disposal a wide range of practices to keep curious third parties at a distance, to generate information about themselves, to influence it and control its utilization. Even those organizations that are more open to research needs rarely fail to set up obstacles to access or at least to develop access routines. The investigator, therefore, has not only to persuade informal “gatekeepers”, but also to follow official channels—in an extreme case extending to a highly official contract management via a research access monitoring agency set up precisely for its purpose. Many such agencies and procedural routes actually function as research preventers. (p. 197)

Therefore, the dynamic interactions between the researcher and gatekeeper can be analysed both in terms of relationships *and* systems. The critical analysis of both can provide important insights into the nature of the field under study (Flick, 2006; Wolff, 2004). Conceptualised thus, a researcher’s failures to gain access become as illuminating about the field under study as their successes (Morrill et al., 1999). Unsuccessful or problematic field negotiations are therefore not necessarily simply written off as failure at the *personal* level, nor a problem of *relations*, but, rather, seen as *systemic* responses to the threat of disruption (Wolff, 2004).

Whilst, to a degree, individual gatekeepers are able to use their own discretion, their actions should not necessarily be seen as a reflection of the gatekeepers’ personal inclinations alone. When seen in systemic terms, gatekeepers can be regarded as performing a critical function on behalf of the organisations for which they work. The style and nature of gatekeeping therefore, to some extent, reflects an organisation’s culture and values. Wolff (2004) provides a range of tactics that organisational gatekeepers commonly employ. He describes these systemic responses as “immune reactions.” They are

- Pass upstairs: the request is first passed to a higher level with a request for examination
- Cross-question: the researcher is repeatedly asked for new presentations of the research goal and procedures.
- Wait and see: the matter is referred for resubmission, because experience shows that many enquiries sort themselves out.
- Make an offer: the request is basically accepted, but the organization offers its own data or agrees to a mode of collection that was not originally foreseen.
- Allocate: times, roles and research opportunities are provided which the organization, from its own standpoint, considers suitable and appropriate.
- Incorporate: the organization makes the research and the results into an affair of its own, and attempts to integrate the researcher into organizational matters or disputes with other organizations, or to give him or her some kind of indirect task. (p. 199)

Wanat (2008) has produced a similar list of what she calls “resistance tactics” (p. 203). They are

- Passing responsibility
- Controlling communication
- Requesting Information
- Forgetting.

Perhaps this final tactic—forgetting is the most effective, if not also the most frustrating, tactic of all from the researcher’s perspective. As Flick (2006) observed, there are generally no sound reasons for organisations refusing research requests. However, “forgetting” effectively leaves the researcher in a state of uncertainty about quite what response they are receiving. This helps forestall any critical judgement or challenge which would be possible if the request had simply been refused. However, the outcome is the same in that the researcher is effectively kept at bay. As Wanat (2008) explains from her own experiences:

When all else failed, “forgetting” was an effective tactic. It seemed reasonable that gatekeepers, all busy professionals, might forget to help arrange an interview. After gatekeepers kept forgetting to perform tasks as promised, it became obvious that forgetting was a method of telling researchers no while appearing to be cooperative. (p. 204)

The discussion which follows provides evidence of several of the tactics outlined above being deployed in different ways. It also aims to better understand why gatekeepers might behave in such ways by situating their actions in a wider context. Some of the responses (or non-responses) can be understood in terms of difficulties with field relations. However, in other cases, as suggested, a systemic analysis is more fruitful in helping to explain more fully the types of responses received. This, in turn, brings to the fore interesting aspects of how the system of care homes for older people is currently working.

The Care Home Manager Negotiation Process

In order to establish contact with residents in a care home a researcher would normally need to go through the care home manager. In this case I pursued three separate strategies in order to both identify and then gain access to older care home residents who had recently been the subject of a review. They were

1. Returning to the three homes where reviews had already been observed on the basis that there was a pre-existing research relationship,
2. Using a personal contact within the Care Quality Commission as a “filter” in order to identify which local care home managers might be the most responsive and research friendly, and;
3. Direct contact to other care homes in the vicinity “from cold.”

The history of the negotiations is briefly summarised in each case. The approach taken was informed by suggestions from the access literature (Feldman et al., 2003). Where appropriate, supporting evidence of specific responses is provided. As a general rule, initial enquiries were carried out by telephone. As long as the care home did not actually articulate a clear rejection at the initial stage, if nothing further was heard, the initial request was followed up with at least three more reminders either by telephone or by email. In all eight care homes were approached out of a possible fourteen in the locality. Three of the other six were run by the “large private chain” referred to below. This chain was the major beneficiary when the council ‘transferred’ its own homes into private ownership a few years earlier. The other three were expensive private homes that I estimated would have few, if any, local authority funded residents.

Returning to the Three Homes

1. Run by a local housing association. When approached, the manager was happy to meet with me. She had provided an interview herself giving the manager’s perspective on reviews. I therefore had reason to believe that we had a relationship of trust. However, several weeks elapsed during which three reminder calls and emails were made, which were acknowledged but nevertheless, no suitable participants were identified. A fourth reminder elicited the following response:

I keep asking the Seniors but unless people have come in without our knowledge (difficult to do!!) then no news at present.

Therefore, in this case, in addition to pressure of work, which is almost a given, another plausible reason would be a lack of suitable participants. The manager had informed me when I first met her that, in line with national trends (Institute of Public Care, 2011); the number of funded residents eligible for a statutory review was decreasing in proportion to those who funded themselves. This was because the home was able to charge self-funders more money. She was therefore trying to draw from a diminishing pool of potential subjects.

Another observation to make about this field encounter is that the manager, whom I had met personally and had established a relationship of trust, had obviously delegated the task of subject identification to senior staff, thus mediating my request in some way over which I had no control. I cannot be sure how this affected the outcome. However, the “seniors” in question had no personal relationship with me and maybe this meant that there was less of a personal commitment. In any event, whatever the reasons, to paraphrase Buchanan et al. (1988) I had “got in” but I had not “got on.”

2. Run by private regional provider. The manager I had known from my original involvement was helpful. She, too, had agreed to be interviewed herself. I also therefore felt I had established a reasonably trusting relationship. However, the home had subsequently undergone a change of manager. The receptionist who first informed me about this change said that email was the best way of contacting him because she knew “for a fact that he always read his emails”. However, despite both telephone and email follow ups, there was no response. It is hard to know why, exactly, there has been no

contact. Not having any personal contact with the manager might well be a factor in the lack of any response. Being associated with the previous management regime might possibly be another complicating factor for some reason. In any event, without any response at all, any interpretations can only be speculative and therefore inconclusive. In this case, I had simply not “got in.”

3. Run by a small local private home owner. This home had also undergone a change of manager since I had made my observation of a review there. I discovered this from the care home receptionist. Wanat (2008) observed that: “Informal gatekeepers within the organization often protect research settings and participants, particularly vulnerable individuals” (p. 193). A telephone call to the home provided a good example of such protective behaviour taking place. Once the receptionist had confirmed that the manager had moved on, I briefly explained the purpose of call and she stated that I would need to get the agreement of the current manager *and* the resident’s relatives. I briefly queried the latter point for residents who had capacity and she informed me that it was best to contact the manager, whilst also explaining that they (the manager) were always very busy and that the home was “in chaos” because a 20 bed extension was in the process of being built. Therefore, in this instance, not only did the informal gatekeeper (the receptionist) protect the research setting by lowering my expectations of receiving a response, she also introduced her own arbitrary conditions for access, ostensibly to protect people who she had clearly decided were ‘vulnerable’ and to whom I was ultimately trying to speak.

This abbreviated field encounter added to the growing impression that became more evident as the research progressed; which was that the project was seldom seen by gatekeepers as an opportunity for residents to participate in something that affected their lives, it was almost always seen as a threat against which they needed to be guarded. Thus, arguably, can care home residents be infantilised and their freedoms eroded.

Additional Care Homes Suggested by the Care Regulator: The Care Quality Commission (CQC)

4. Run by a large private chain. Having made contact over the phone, the manager agreed to meet me at the home to be given more information. When I visited, she was not there, “being out on an emergency” and had delegated another member of the senior staff to see me without explaining to them what the exact purpose of my visit was. After some discussion, the member of the staff, eager to facilitate, produced details of four recently reviewed residents and then proceeded to take me to see them there and then. I had not prepared for this to happen and did not feel comfortable with calling in unannounced to unsuspecting residents. In the event, I said I would leave them some information and follow it up afterwards. This episode had an air of chaos about it as we walked round the home, seeking the people on the list who, it turned out, naturally enough, were in varying states of (un)readiness. One was asleep, another was lying on their bed and another was being visited by their daughter. I told the staff member that this was not the most appropriate way to proceed and that I wanted to leave the residents some information and arrange to see them if they wanted to meet me at a more convenient time. This did later yield one interview and the visiting daughter, curious to

know what I wanted, also agreed to be interviewed at a later point. I also later tracked the manager down and interviewed her on the subject of reviews.

Most of the time during this phase of the research process I felt as if I had been kept at bay by various levels of care home gatekeeper. In this instance, I did strike up a relationship of sorts with the care home staff. In fact, it yielded three separate interviews, which was very productive as they each illustrated quite different perspectives. However, I was granted access, almost accidentally, because the actual manager was not there and the staff member delegated to deal with me was confused about what she should do exactly. The interesting point was that having been let in, ironically, I was given far more access than was ethical. I did not feel that the privacy of the residents was being respected as I was walked around the home. In this case I felt that the “gatekeeper” had actually failed to protect their field properly. Nonetheless, I did seize the opportunity (Feldman et al., 2003), as I was able to leave participant information at that point and return to collect relevant interview data later. I also felt I had gained valuable insight into how certain care home staff, in this instance, regarded their residents’ rights. As has been said, care homes represent a space where one group of people’s home and another group of people’s workplace meet (Peace, Kellaher, & Willcocks, 1997). In this case, staff felt able to take a stranger straight into their resident’s private places with minimal thought and no preparation. It was clearly considered more of a workplace than a home. This was both an uncomfortable but educational experience.

5. Run by a large private chain. The initial response from the manager was positive and she agreed to my going to see her. When provided with more information, she continued to display interest in the research. However, the manager did not identify any suitable participants over the six month period that followed. Follow up emails initially received a response. For example, the following was received after three months:

I have had a few reviews but they were Dementia residents (sic), when do you have to complete your work? Don’t give up hope I will keep trying for you.

The tone is helpful and a very plausible reason is given. However, several weeks went by without further contact, phone messages were left but not answered, email reminders drew responses of increasing brevity about being away and the final reminder, six months after the initial meeting, received no reply. It is hard to know exactly why the manager seemed to gradually disengage from the process. However, it might be partially inferred from the email above. It could be that she had a very narrow idea about who was suitable. When we first met she told me about “a very nice gentleman who would be very helpful to me.” It turned out that he had not had a review recently so I did not follow it up. However, it was apparent that she was inclined to be very selective about who she put forward. We agreed that if the person did not have capacity—and it seems that the home has a large number of residents with dementia for example—then they would not be suitable, but that anyone who did have capacity to give informed consent should be offered the opportunity to participate. Apart from the usual likely explanations—pressure of work, lack of time, “forgetting” and so on—it might well be that this manager was waiting for their ideal subject to come up. It also might be seen as an example of what

Wanat (2008) describes as “controlling information.” Judging from their earlier comments, it looked as if the manager wanted to select participants who would present a certain image of the system. Actually finding such participants was possibly more difficult than she originally imagined.

6. Run by a local housing association. As with the other managers nominated by the CQC inspector, I received a prompt and positive initial response:

You would be more than welcome to visit XXXX to interview our residents feel free to suggest dates and times.

I arranged to visit and discuss details of the research and what I was hoping they would do in terms of introducing me to suitable residents. This seemed to be the basis for a good field relationship. However, reminders have drawn progressively “clipped” responses. For example:

None as yet but will let you know when

Were this to be received in isolation the lack of success in finding anyone could be put down to bad luck or bad timing. However, in 2006 a total of 1480 older people were being supported in care homes in the county overall, suggesting there should be a certain amount of review activity in care homes most weeks (National Statistics, 2006).

Given the physical and mental frailty of most care home residents (Bowman, Whistler, & Ellerby, 2004; Help the Aged, 2007), one might surmise that a certain degree of filtering was going on the grounds of perceived vulnerability. This, of course, assumes that the care manager actually devoted any thought to the research in between reminders. Again, with no discernible incentive for the organisation, this assumption might be mistaken.

A final observation about access can be made from this case. This manager was one of three nominated by a CQC inspector. The tactic of using the inspector was successful in that each manager replied very quickly and expressed interest in helping. Arguably, given their relationship with the nominator, they were unable to refuse or not reply. However, having being positive and cooperative to start off with, all three cases petered out in their own way. This illustrates that a powerful sponsor can facilitate *access* but they cannot guarantee *cooperation* (Wanat, 2008). Interestingly, had it been a piece of official CQC sponsored research rather than an individual student’s PhD—which obviously became clear in the first meeting—the outcomes might well have been different.

Cold Call: Cold Calling Care Homes from the Local Care Directory

7. Run by a large private chain. The initial approach was made via telephone. The manager gave a positive response and asked to be sent further details including evidence of ethical approval which I did immediately. After an email reminder, the manager forwarded me the following response from a higher level gatekeeper (a director of the company). This episode demonstrates graphically at least two of Wolff’s

organisational “immune reactions”; “pass-upstairs” (from the manager) and “cross-question” (from the higher gatekeeper). The email read:

Need confirmation from [the] university and confirmation of indemnity for any issues arising during and after research relating to residents families staff pct nurses or doctors Applicant waives right to claim against home company for any incidents occurring during and after research and insures against. Risks accordingly. Also CRB on applicant and approval of xxxxx social service plus meeting costs of social service staff involved and waving right to claims from social service for any legal costs that may arise at any time as a result of the research project. agreement of pct if any nurse involved and doctors. Lastly confirmation of capacity of participants and agreement of relatives. All participants and families to see final thesis. In draft form. We will also obtain our insurers comment

My first reaction to this particular gatekeeper response was that it was effectively designed to stop any research in its tracks. Details of ethical approval from both the university and county council had already been provided, including confirmation of CRB. This was clearly considered insufficient and a string of arbitrary and contradictory conditions are added, (for example, “applicant waives their right to claim against” and “all participants to see the “final” thesis in “draft” form). The comments reveal a degree of defensive mindedness to say the least and would appear to confirm that, for this organisation at the higher level, the idea of research was regarded as inherently risky. The language of “costs” and “claims” suggested a concern to protect the organization’s public image in the event of the research revealing anything damaging. It also provides insights into the organisation’s attitude towards its service users. It is effectively denying them the choice to participate in a project which seeks their views about an aspect of the service.

As if to underline the complex and, often, confusing nature of these specific field negotiations, homes four and five were both run by the same private chain as home seven. Whereas the managers in those homes dealt with the requests themselves, the manager of seven felt the need to “pass upstairs”, thus creating a situation where their ostensible offer to help was effectively blocked by a heavy-handed response from a higher level organisational gatekeeper. In a follow up call, I informed the manager that all the conditions demanded could not be met. Her response was to say that she thought that the email was ‘typical’ of the director in question. Apparently, the company had been “hurt” by negative publicity in the past and she assured me that she would see whether she could sort something out. She had even identified a resident with a review coming up. This episode provides an interesting variant of organisational gatekeeper behaviour—it felt almost like a form of “soft cop - hard cop” response. It is difficult to know whether the initial gatekeeper (the manager) knew all along that access would be blocked from above and was being rather cynical in how positive she was or, as is probably the case, within one organisation, there exist a multitude of views about research and my request unearthed two that contradicted each other. My feeling was that, as with all the homes approached, they actually knew little about social research processes, and, in the absence of any formal, thought-out protocols, individual actors made their own pragmatic

responses mostly on intuition. The different responses received from homes four, five and seven illustrated the lack of a coherent organisational response overall. Ironically, the outcome was the same in each case (no access secured to residents), which suggests the impulse to resist is fairly deeply embedded in the system.

8. Run by private regional provider. This final field encounter is worth recounting in a certain amount of detail because it reveals more of the Kafkaesque character of the world the researcher enters when trying to research aspects of the care home system. Having checked the details on the CQC website, I telephoned and asked for the manager by name. The person who answered the phone said the manager was not there and asked what I wanted. I explained the purpose of the call. The person then said that they were the regional manager and started to explain how useful reviews were for staff, relatives etc. I returned to the issue of how to gain access to residents to seek their views and he suggested I put a request in writing to him at the regional office and that he would get back within a week. I sent the request later that day, supported by participant information and confirmation of ethical approval. A week later, having heard nothing, I rang the regional office to be told by someone in the office that the regional manager was effectively “firefighting”, very seldom visited the office, had not been in for at least a week and was not scheduled to visit again for another week. My unopened letter—sent first class—was duly located and put to the top of the pile. The person at the regional office suggested that the best way to contact the regional manager was via his work mobile. I rang and left a message which remained unanswered. After some days, I rang the care home again hoping that the manager would have returned. The receptionist informed me that the actual manager whose details were on the CQC website had left some time ago and the regional manager was in temporary charge of the home—something he had failed to tell me in the original call when he implied he just happened to be there on a visit. I left another message for him to call but he never replied.

Amongst other things, it is interesting to note the regional manager’s unwillingness to admit that the home was managerless. Ironically, this exchange took place in the same week that CQC revealed the full extent of managerless care homes (Pitt, 2010). There appears to be a problem with finding suitable managers in the care home system, partly to do with the qualifications they are expected to possess. The effects of this have caused widespread concern. For example, Cynthia Bower, chief executive of the CQC explained:

We know from experience that care services without leadership can struggle to address any problems that may arise. (Pitt, 2010)

This underlines that the organisation was experiencing serious problems and, in the circumstances, the reluctance to allow a researcher in could be understood in this context. However, the regional manager seemingly wanted to obscure the reality of what was going on. The suggestion to put the request in writing was followed by a string of unanswered messages. It would appear that when ‘caught cold’, there was unwillingness to actually say no, but that, given time to reflect, the gatekeeper’s instincts were to impede access to the system.

Reflections on Field Relations

Negotiating access is based on building relationships with gatekeepers, which is an ill-defined, unpredictable, uncontrollable process. (Wanat, 2008, p. 192)

The eight different field encounters were spread over a three-month period, during which, after numerous telephone calls, emails, visits and letters, the outcome was one actual interview with an older person—ironically, gained opportunistically rather than through a methodically prepared route.

Clearly, some of the lack of success in the field could be attributed to relationship issues, some of it bad luck or even a lack of perseverance. Although, I feel I kept at the task quite doggedly and in a way that was both reasonable and non-threatening. However, I also feel that, amongst other reasons my difficulties in establishing effective relationships with gatekeepers was hindered by systemic factors. One such factor being staffing problems meaning that opportunities to meet and get to know gatekeepers are limited. They are usually very busy and staff turnover is high. Therefore, even when personal meetings take place (rather than just phone or email contact) and a relationship begins to be established, there are pressures on the manager to delegate the task to others—which complicates matters. As was also evident, it is not uncommon for managers to leave the post relatively frequently. People new in post are, understandably, more concerned with getting to grip with running the home than with involving themselves in external research of no obvious or immediate benefit. Without a degree of both continuity and stability, it is hard to forge effective working relationships in the field. It is like trying to hit a constantly moving target. Another important difficulty, in the circumstances, was finding an effective form of words or “hook” (Feldman et al., 2003) with which to persuade the gatekeepers that there was a realistic incentive for them to cooperate. As Flick (2006) has commented, there were no obvious benefits to the system from the project that could be used to reward facilitation.

Therefore, in addition to providing important lessons about the complexities of field relations, through an iterative process of “reflexive interpretation” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009), this experience has also provided certain thematic insights into aspects of care home culture, particularly in respect of attitudes towards residents. Overarching both points is the apparent defensive mindset that seems to characterise much of the system. This latter point needs, briefly, to be put in a wider context.

Discussion of Emerging Themes in Context

In recent years the care home system in England has been reported in the media as being “in crisis” for various reasons (BBC, 2010; Channel 4, 2010; Telegraph, 2009; Times, 2009). These include: funding cuts; home closures; a rise in reported complaints (including complaints of abuse); a rise in reported critical incidents; staff shortages, high staff turnover, poor standards and poor access to health care. Seen against such a backdrop, care home-related research clearly becomes a sensitive issue. Thus, those employed in the care home sector could be forgiven for feeling a certain degree of caution in response to any research requests received. To an extent, this helps understand

several of the apparent “immune reactions” experienced. However, along the way, the field negotiations provided some insights into other aspects of care home cultures.

Controlling

In care homes, there is a fine and, sometimes, blurred line between care and control (Bland, 1999). The time spent on field negotiations gave the impression that care home managers and others, perhaps emphasised control rather than care in how they treated the access requests. There was no evidence, for example, of requests being passed on by gatekeepers to the older residents whose views I was interested to hear. Arguably, the high degree of control that care home gatekeepers appeared to exercise over their residents’ lives could be said to be an extension of their job role (cf. Reeves, 2010). Despite securing ethical approval from recognized bodies, care home managers controlled my access requests in a variety of idiosyncratic ways, for example, through cross-questioning and introducing checks of their own. The most common method of control was by controlling time, through “delay” and “wait” responses.

Time, Delay, and Waiting

Care home residents are in a paradoxical situation as far as time is concerned. They are close to the end of their lives, and therefore, in one sense, their time is running out. However, in another sense, they have time on their hands. For example, Help the Aged (2007) found that many older care home residents spend much of their time “in passive inactivity” (p.76). Therefore, not without some justification, the care home experience has been likened to living in “God’s Waiting Room” (Times, 2009). Care homes are therefore busy workplaces that revolve around a “culture of waiting.” How time, delay and waiting are prioritised and managed reveals something about the institutional culture. Traditionally, in care homes, personal care tasks are given the greatest priority, other aspects of residents’ lives less so (Help the Aged, 2007). Reflecting on the gatekeeper behaviour; the lack of responses, the need for continual reminders and so on, it was obvious that my request to interview residents was accorded very low priority by the managers and therefore I could wait. As it turned out, delay proved to be an effective blocking tactic, revealing the more controlling side of care homes. Ultimately, it also revealed how little importance was attached to devoting any time to discovering the views of residents whom, ironically, would have had plenty of spare time to contribute them.

Protecting the Vulnerable

By definition, the older care home population is “vulnerable” in one way or another. Older people would not normally reside in a care home unless they had complex needs. However, that does not mean that many do not have the mental capacity to be able to express their view about a review in which they had been personally involved. The issues around the perceived vulnerability of the residents, arguably, get to the heart of many of the access problems. It seemed that much of the delay in failing to identify participants was due to the feeling that the residents were vulnerable and therefore

needed to be protected from risk. Given the allegations of abuse attached to care homes, this view could be considered laudable. However, very few participants were even considered, let alone put forward, over a relatively long period of asking. This was despite obtaining ethical approval from both the university and the local authority, which had, at its heart, the need to ensure that all participants were not exposed to risk. The outcome suggests that the blanket of vulnerability had been thrown rather too indiscriminately over the residents, and that the risks to them of being interviewed seem to have been exaggerated. This is the point where the gatekeepers can be most criticised. They might not, personally, have seen much value in the research, they were probably busy and selecting suitable residents would have taken some of their time. However, they do not seem to have seen it from the older person's perspective. The older people appear to have been solely constructed as of needing protection from threat rather than being offered the opportunity to talk about their experiences.

Screening

In the introduction it was mentioned that applying the concept of the “street-level bureaucrat” (Lipsky, 1980) had proved useful in understanding how different review officers used their professional discretion in how they conducted the actual reviews. Lipsky also talked about the associated role of “screener”, stating:

The role of screener would not be cause for comment if screeners performed their jobs as they are defined in theory—that is, making decisions involving minimal discretion. However, in important respects screeners often come to function as street-level bureaucrats, exercising discretion in important areas of people's lives, although without the authority to do so. (Lipsky, 1980, p. 129)

Screener best encompasses the various overlapping roles played by the gatekeepers in this study. *Screen* has multiple shades of meaning. It can, for example, mean to act as a block, to guard or to protect and it can also mean to filter, to “vet”, to make a decision about or to assess the value or suitability of something. Arguably, all of these meanings become conflated and apply in this case. The gatekeepers were screening (guarding) the older people, screening (protecting) themselves and they were screening (assessing the suitability of) the research project. The ambiguity attached to the concept of screening is important because, whilst there is no doubt that the care home managers had the authority to screen in the sense of protecting vulnerable residents from unnecessary risks, it is doubtful that they had the authority to screen in the sense of prioritising as low the value of the research for the older people they were screening. In doing so, the managers exercised their screening powers in ways which denied choice, opportunity and involvement to a marginalised group. However, precisely because of the ambiguous authority in respect of their screening role, it is impossible to know whether this was deliberate or not. In such cases, researchers are denied the space to complete projects involving “vulnerable” subjects, whilst the subjects themselves are denied the opportunity to even learn of the projects' existence in the first place.

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