

# NEGOTIATING ACCESS: PRESENTING A CREDIBLE PROJECT

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Each research project has its particular problems in identifying the data to be obtained, and the method(s) adopted in its collection. Social science research has its own particular difficulties, which can be exacerbated by the scientist's desire for 'rigour'. In the quest for a phenomenological perspective requiring the detailed description of everyday experiences, the taking of audio and visual records is extremely valuable. Yet obtaining a contemporaneous account is fraught with difficulties, which the researcher must address if a meaningful project is to be accomplished.

This paper describes the preliminary stages of an ongoing research project, where commercial and personal sensitivities were addressed in the pursuit of a detailed account of a project management team in the construction industry. The obtaining of 'access', the negotiations to accomplish the degree of intimacy required are described, including the author's reflections on the presentation of the research in such a fashion that it is perceived as a credible undertaking by a collaborating industrial organization.

Keywords: audio record, industrial collaboration, phenomenology, research method.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects upon the issue of carrying out research adopting a qualitative methodology, in such a fashion that the research instruments themselves become an issue for the object(s) of the project, and, by implication, the researcher. Such issues are typically characterized in terms of achieving access to a setting. The work described in this paper is an attempt to provide an insight into phenomena which are sensitive in terms of their scientific subject matter (psychology) and the circumstances in which the data for the study is generated (multi-disciplinary team meetings).

This approach to negotiating access, has been heavily influenced by Sudnow's study of death and dying, in particular the act of 'befriending' individuals in the hospital setting (Sudnow 1967: 7). Further, in the ethnographical field, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) provide numerous examples of the difficulties likely to be encountered, and methodological strategies to overcome them.

The research is centred on management processes in the construction industry, in particular the interactions which take place within a group of professional experts. The paper describes the objectives of the study upon which the research is founded, and highlights the specific difficulties which the 'object of study' has engendered in the process of gaining access.

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Attention is paid to the textual style of correspondence used in the gaining-of-access process. Extracts from this correspondence<sup>1</sup> are incorporated; thus the paper is seen both as a reflection upon a method, and a set of tools which may prove to have some instrumental value to readers.

The history to the work presented here can be found in two papers from previous ARCOM conferences (Hugill 1997, 1998). Thus, this third extract is a continuation of the author's period as a 'scientist-in-training'. While readers may be minded to refer to the earlier work, I should like to reproduce a brief extract from last year's paper, since it encapsulates the essence of the method:

*Lord Nelson... after explaining to his captains the plan of attack he intended to use at Trafalgar went on to say, "No captain can do very wrong who places his ship alongside that of the enemy." In the same way, no one who studies a group will go far wrong if he gets close to it and, by whatever methods available, observe all that he can (Homans 1951: 21).*

Thus, as Homans so clearly states, it becomes a matter standing alongside the project team, taking a contemporaneous record of interactions.

### **Stylistic approach: the author's 'voice'**

This paper is presented in the first person and in the active voice, unlike the passive format more usually encountered in scientific writing. This approach is favoured by certain schools in the social sciences, especially, anthropology, and more pertinently, in my own case, ethnomethodology. The importance of this is explained thus:

*We are just plain folks who emphasize our similarity to ordinary people, rather than the differences... we write informally, favour the personal pronoun, and appeal to what we-and-the-reader know in common rather than what we know and the reader doesn't (Becker 1986:37).*

It is, then, a matter of style and convention. In work of this nature, there is no need to conceal<sup>2</sup> the 'agency' of actions. Therefore, let me set out in what follows, the story of how I persuaded a large commercial organization to let me sit in on project team meetings.

## **FINDING A 'WILLING' COLLABORATOR**

### **Early attempts: 'false starts'**

My extensive background in the construction industry, (nearly 20 years experience in the industry, and hence the establishment of a large number of contacts) lead me to expect little difficulty in gaining access to a project team. This subsequently proved to be an erroneous belief.

My initial approaches can be considered in terms characterized by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 60) as: 'mobilization of existing social networks, based on acquaintanceship, kinship, occupational membership'. In other words, people with whom I had been involved during the course of ordinary work-related activities.

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<sup>1</sup>The extracts have been anonymized for obvious reasons.

<sup>2</sup>I am grateful to Professor Sharrock, University of Manchester, for his guidance which 'dissolved' the problem: 'in a paper by Smith and Brown, "the liquid was heated..." we all know it was Brown and Smith and their research staff that heated the liquid, why remove the agency?'

In particular, these acquaintances were generally members of one of the professional bodies typically involved in the construction process. However, in order to obtain permission for access, it would be necessary to gain the agreement of the client organization. Thus the route to achieve access now involved a series of activities:

- explaining the research to an acquaintance;
- (ability of acquaintance to understand research);<sup>1</sup>
- acquaintance explains research to client's representative
- (ability of client's representative to understand research).

While the presentation of the 'explaining' process is in some respects a pedestrian activity, it is highlighted here to emphasize the 'handing-on' of research objectives between concerned individuals, and the potential it holds for misunderstanding.

Several attempts to obtain access to a construction project were made using this approach, without success. Where the process was failing (and here I am limited in my ability to offer an explanation since I was not present when the subject was raised) was in the ability of my acquaintances to adequately explain the nature of the 'group dynamics' I was interested in, and more importantly, what they (client) would 'get' (some tangible benefit) out of 'it' (the research project).

Thus, I realized another route was required, although the experience at this time was informative. It showed that only direct access to a client was likely to provide a reasonable possibility of access. Further, given that I had been proved wrong in my belief that access would not pose a problem, once an initial approach had been accepted, that I needed to prepare a coherent and persuasive argument to gain the sort of access I was looking for.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Later attempts: 'true starts'**

It now became necessary to accomplish two main tasks if access was to be obtained without further delays to the research project. First, to identify client organizations who were most likely to be receptive to the sort of scrutiny the research envisages; second, a representation of the research project<sup>3</sup> which would encourage a positive response from the potential collaborator.

Reflecting on the 'receptivity' of potential collaborators, I considered that it was important to find an organization which was likely to be sympathetic to the nature and characteristics of academic enterprise: the particularly exploratory nature of a PhD, in terms of the cautiousness with which the 'scientist-in-training' goes about the business of examining matters of a pre- and post-hypothetical nature. Here I was fortunate in that a work colleague (of some seniority) was widely known for his connection with a major industrial undertaking (which is also a regular procurer), therefore I needed to obtain his support.

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<sup>1</sup>Parentheses are used here to distinguish this process from others where a 'physical' action is occurring.

<sup>2</sup>Here, to use a football analogy, once the penalty area had been reached, the ball must be driven into the back of the net; or at least towards the goal.

<sup>3</sup>The 'project' here is taken to include not only the objective, method, data etc. of the principle exercise, but also its relevance to the collaborator, and the ability of the researcher to undertake the work. In other words the entire *credibility* of the undertaking.

At this point in the paper, I would like to dwell briefly on the circumstances of my solicitation, since the events are of interest in terms of credibility, a matter I shall be returning to later.

As part of my administrative duties at work, I had chaired a particular committee and had had to 'adjudicate' a particularly heated debate about the voting machinery /decision-making regime which the committee should adopt. The dispute was resolved (after a number of discrete political interventions on my part) amicably, and a fair degree of understanding had developed between myself and the 'senior colleague' as a result.

The colleague was subsequently approached and in turn contacted his collaborator to ascertain whether they were willing to consider my research proposal; the answer, in its most basic terms, was 'yes'. Here I would like to venture that what had aided my own access was the 'credibility' of the colleague in the perception of the collaborator. Thus, I was allowed to meet with this organization on the basis that their previous dealings had proceeded satisfactorily, and there was no reason at the present moment to suspect that I would proceed in any other fashion. In a sense, this initial access was achieved through the vicarious credibility of the colleague. Later sections will outline how this 'link' with the credible-colleague was maintained in meetings with the collaborator.

## NEGOTIATING DETAILED ACCESS REQUIREMENTS

Initial telephone contact to set up a meeting with the potential collaborator revealed that the person with whom my colleague had usually dealt with, had delegated me, and my request, to a 'middle manager' (MidMan)<sup>1</sup>. A meeting was arranged.

Let me now dwell briefly on our meeting. This proceeded amicably, we exchanged biographical<sup>2</sup> notes and I offered, what in retrospect, was a fulsome (overly so?) explanation of the research project. The situation which pertained has some similarities with Whyte's experiences:

*I began with a rather elaborate explanation. I was studying the social history of Cornerville – but I had a new angle. Instead of working from the past up to the present, I was seeking to get a thorough knowledge of present conditions and then work from the present to the past. I was quite pleased with this explanation at the time... While this explanation had at least the virtue of covering everything that I might eventually want to do in the district, it was apparently too involved to mean anything to Cornerville people (Whyte, 1981: 300).*

While I am unable to judge the extent to which my explanation meant anything, I can recollect the feeling that I had been very thorough in my exposition. The one point of 'resistance' during the discussion concerned my wish to use a cassette recorder. Following some initial reservations, the MidMan was persuaded that their use would not necessarily cause a problem, he nevertheless wished to refer the matter to his manager; a person who I will refer to as a 'senior manager' (SenMan).

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<sup>1</sup>The terms used to denote individuals indicate their relative seniority, while preserving their anonymity.

<sup>2</sup>This was a deliberate action, part of establishing 'credibility'.

Following the meeting with MidMan, I undertook a series of actions designed to make the research project seem valuable and to address concerns surrounding the recording of conversations. I achieved this through a ‘follow up’ letter, to which was attached a synopsis(v.1)<sup>1</sup> of the research proposal (abbreviated from the formal PhD submission) and a set of ‘Confidentiality Procedures’. This first meeting represents the commencement of my involvement with the company collaborating in the research.

### **Creating a favourable impression**

A meeting with SenMan was arranged at the behest of MidMan, as described above. This commenced in much the same fashion as I had already experienced with MidMan, indeed, it felt on occasion very much like an actor repeating their lines. At the time I had prepared myself to give an account which I considered would cast me in a favourable light. This ‘light’, as it were, can be expressed in terms of my own sense of what passes for ‘credibility’ as perceived by the person with whom access negotiations were being progressed.

Elements of my ‘spontaneous’ dialogue included: 20 years experience with the construction industry; the ‘naming’ of significant projects I had been involved with; naming of well known organizations I had worked for; finally, and crucially, the work of my colleague with the organization which had resulted in a publication, which clearly recorded the sponsorship by the firm on the front cover. This is in many respects an impressive ‘prop’ including colour diagrams and photographs etc. The use of this ‘sign vehicle’<sup>2</sup> was also a conscious effort to facilitate an association between the work of the ‘credible colleague’ and the stranger before them, who aspired to credibility.

The conversation eventually turned to the matter of recording the activities of the project team. Although I have subsequently developed a more coherent argument for the making of such records, little resistance was encountered. The willingness here was ‘facilitated’ by the consideration of Confidentiality Procedures which I had prepared beforehand. A slight amendment to these procedures was requested during the discussions: the inclusion of all records (written and oral) in terms of confidentiality, and the presentation of the procedures in a fashion which afforded the inclusion of my own signature.

One other matter arose during the discussion with SenMan, which was to play a part in the preparation of the research proposal referred to previously. In the meetings which had taken place thus far, I had offered the fullest possible account of the research, its objectives, the data required and some background in terms of stress and its psychological consequences. During discussions with SenMan, it became apparent that he had attended a number of management training courses, during which time he had developed an ‘interest’ in people’s actions and their motivations. SenMan considered that his education and most recent training had placed him in a position vis-à-vis employees of the company whereby he was able to obtain ‘special knowledge’. In other words, his experiences provided him with the opportunity to obtain insights about the workforce, and further, that what he was able to deduce was

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<sup>1</sup>The content of the synopsis was subsequently changed for reasons which will be discussed, thus, for the time being, it is necessary to distinguish between different versions of this document.

<sup>2</sup>Goffman, 1959: 2. I have only recently started reading this excellent piece of work. It will in time, make a useful contribution to my perspective on the whole ‘access’ process.

unknown to most people. SenMan was very much alive to the sensitivities of this situation<sup>1</sup>

What is the significance of this factor? The notion of the ‘privileged’ position held by SenMan and the insight such a perspective was able to provide had a bearing upon the format of the research synopsis subsequently prepared. Whilst I am not aware that SenMan was in any way attempting to influence the conduct of myself with employees, it did awaken me to the possibility that my research could be misconstrued. Thus in reflecting upon how to revise the synopsis, it was now necessary to add to previously identified issues, concerns about actor’s perceptions of precisely ‘what’ was being observed. The following section describes the preparation of the research synopsis.

### **Documents as contributors to access negotiations**

As part of my submission to the University of Manchester to study for a PhD, I had prepared a research proposal. In preparation for my meeting with MidMan (referred to above) I turned my attention to this document to see how it could be used to some advantage.

It is in the nature of academic research proposals that they are crafted for an academic audience. Thus, they concentrate on the theoretical issues of method and data (since fundamentally, seen in the context of research training, a PhD has a profoundly epistemological purpose); these matters are clearly not as meaningful to an industrial audience. Thus a synopsis of the proposal was required that was both more accessible, and established (and perhaps reinforced) the credibility of the researcher and the research project.

To help establish my own credibility I gave much attention to the ‘crafting’ of letters and the synopsis of the formal research proposal. Perhaps ‘good’ writing is too much taken for granted, I soon found that my own skills in this area were not as developed as I wished them to be. I made this judgement from reading research papers and the like in the research field (ethnomethodology) in which this particular project is attempting to furrow. In other words, I found that some papers ‘spoke to me’ clearly, coherently, eloquently, and in so doing were able to convey their message superbly. An extract from my letter to MidMan, following our meeting will be useful here:

*In working with #####<sup>2</sup> there are two major factors which I must consider at all times: confidentiality and intrusiveness. The former can be considered from both commercial and personal perspectives, both of which are utterly sacrosanct. Secondly every effort will be made to cause no interference with the operation of ##### business; clearly if the research is to be valid it should unobtrusively record the workings of teams, unhindered by the researcher.*

*To address both of these concerns I have enclosed an initial set of working procedures, which I see as forming the basis for any involvement I have with #####, its contractors, consultants, suppliers and the like. I am amenable to a discussion of this aspect in more detail; the proposals contained are therefore a first draft.*

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<sup>1</sup>Whether these insights are as real or powerful as a person believes is not relevant at this point in time; their significance resides in the perception held by both SenMan and employees that a ‘special’ perspective can be obtained with such knowledge.

<sup>2</sup>‘Hatches’ are used to disguise organizations involved in the project.

It can be seen that these two paragraphs attempt to reassure the collaborator about maintaining the confidentiality of material obtained during fieldwork, and further that this has been broken down into commercial and personal matters. At this point in the paper, I wish to limit the discussion to the matter of raising confidentiality as an issue.

This first meeting proceeded satisfactorily, an agreement in principle was reached about my involvement with the organization, and a potential project identified for the research. The use of a cassette recorder was raised and received a cautious reception. MidMan was unable to provide unequivocal agreement to the use of a recording device. His concerns can be simply stated as being twofold: the reaction of consultants and contractors on the project; the potential for the organization to be exposed to outside scrutiny in circumstances where tapes (or transcripts) were 'leaked'. The matter would need to be referred to a more senior member of the organization; SenMan, who has already been introduced to the reader in an earlier section.

Details of the discussion with SenMan are reported above. It will be remembered that little objection to the use of a cassette recorder was raised. At the conclusion of the meeting, it was agreed that the 'way forward' was for me to meet with the manager within whose team responsibility for the particular project was likely to be. Before examining this stage of the negotiation however, I should like to introduce a paragraph from the correspondence which 'followed up' the meeting with SenMan:

*One of the major points of my letter to Mr ##### (MidMan) concerned the manner of recording interactions amongst the project team. We touched upon this in our own discussions, and I was pleased to receive your support in the use of cassette tape recorders. My earlier letter anticipated the reservations which might be held in respect of this 'aid to note-taking' and I therefore included a set of (draft) procedures designed to ensure the confidentiality of material obtained in this manner. Our own discussions covered this point and I have noted your comment that the same standard of care should be exercised with all material (not just audio records). I shall now modify the procedures to accord with your wishes, and amend their presentation to specifically reflect the project concerned, exhibiting them as a document with my personal signature. I trust this will lend sufficient gravitas to convince others of the seriousness with which the issue is held.*

The paragraph taken from the letter is careful to note the support of SenMan, it also introduces the notion of the cassette recorder as an 'aid to note-taking'.

Now let me turn to the meeting with the manager responsible for the project which was expected to form the basis of the collaborative research exercise. This individual is in the hierarchy of the organization two 'levels' below the most senior person I dealt with and thus reports directly to MidMan; although it should be noted that he does not have day-to-day responsibility for project matters. Thus I have chosen to use the abbreviation/pseudonym 'TeaMan', as short-hand for Team Manager.

My notes from this meeting are less extensive than on previous occasions, however, I am able to recall the reaction to my request to tape project meetings. This can be most usefully summarized by taking an extract from a letter I wrote to SenMan following our meeting (this particular correspondence was at the request of TeaMan):

*In our meeting the discussion inevitably turned to the means of capturing interactions amongst the project team. Although ##### (TeaMan) was*

*persuaded as to the merits of using tape recorders as an aid to note-taking, he was concerned that their sudden introduction at this early stage would have a detrimental effect on the conduct of team meetings. I am of course acutely sensitive to ### concerns; clearly if research is to be effective it should not in itself influence the 'thing' that is being studied.*

*Whilst I must respect #### (the collaborating company) wishes here, I did make a proposal that the use of a tape recorder should not be entirely dismissed for the remainder of the project. What we agreed to do was to put their use to one side until such time as I have become 'accepted' by the project team (in other words, they are comfortable with my presence during the occurrence of day-to-day project matters). Once it was felt that this level of familiarity had been reached, ### and I would examine the matter afresh.*

So it can be seen that the outcome of my discussion with TeaMan was that I would not be allowed to introduce a tape recorder for the time being. However, I was anxious to keep the matter under consideration, and therefore I secured an agreement not to 'dismiss' their use for the remainder of the project. The concluding paragraph of this letter also refers to certain amendments to the synoptic research proposal which has been referred to earlier, in the reporting of meetings and correspondence with SenMan. It is therefore appropriate that these changes should be dealt with at this point in the paper.

It will be remembered from previously discussed matters, that SenMan had alerted me to the potential sensitivities of people's perceptions of 'special perspectives' (footnote 11 refers). Thus I now used the opportunity of revising the synopsis to remove sections which I considered would create unnecessary concern amongst other members of the project team; since it was the intention to distribute copies of the synopsis as a part of my 'introduction' to the project. There are clear and significant ethical issues to be considered here.

The basis for the deletion of sections from the synopsis was primarily where there was mention of stress, anxiety, psychology, or related scientific disciplines. I did this because of a concern that members of the project team might erroneously consider that the research was interested in the actions /performance of individual members, whereas this was not at all a part of the research

## **CONCLUSION**

Access to the 'thing', the data to be studied, is not merely a matter of following a series of routes which will eventually result in the amassing of data. It is not a series of sequential, concurrent events, performed as if we were in a roller-coaster climbing towards the first drop, there are no ratchets to stop you from falling back.

Negotiations must proceed cautiously, balancing the scientist's (especially those 'in-training') enthusiasm for 'rigour', with the sensitivities of industrial collaborators to the detailed scrutiny required by the research undertaking.

The 'craft' skills of the social scientist including the derivation of method and data from objectives, have illustrated the crucial importance of data in the scientific enterprise. The next stage, obtaining data, and most especially an accurate contemporaneous account has been illustrated in this brief account of my own research. Similarly, the paper has provided some indication of the difficulties which



may be encountered when the most detailed scrutiny is attempted, and ways in which these can be overcome.

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