Keep a-knocking (but you can’t come in): The issue of passing by the gatekeeper and gaining linguistic access to qualitative research fields

Göran Widding*

Abstract
This paper explores methods that researchers, including students, use to gain access to research being conducted in their subject areas. I conducted a review of the literature on research methodology to find out how the access problem is defined and the points highlighted by scholars. The review was based on articles accessed through databases like Web of Science, reference books on research methodology, and handbooks on scientific writing. I then summarised the thoughts of two philosophers of science, Jorgen Habermas and Naomi Scheman, on the subject. The analysis focused on elements challenging the process of gaining access, including power and diversity dimensions. The paper concludes with a consideration of gender and diversity as operational frameworks in the process of gaining access and the possibility of applying a practice grounded in trust that would strengthen an inclusive process and the validity of a research project.

Keywords: gaining access, communication, power, gender and diversity, context

Introduction
“Previous agreements? But my staff members are now saying they feel too busy and have neither the time to be interviewed nor to be observed, I´m sorry” (end of conversation; author’s translation into English). With that abrupt ending to my conversation with the principal I realised that I had not gained any access at all. What had gone wrong with our communication?

Surely, several readers recognise the situation that I have encountered as a PhD student, whereby in a particular setting, a group of teachers, and a headmaster of a school, despite earlier promises, granted me no access to collect research data for my thesis. In our conversations, the school’s new headmaster referred to the upcoming organisational changes, claiming that the staff could not cope with the extra burden my study represented. This largely came as an unpleasant surprise given that I had completed my research design and was finally at the breakthrough stage and eagerly looking forward to searching for my answers. Then this happened, and I suddenly...
had to find a new research site. It made me wonder: What can I actually learn from this event?

Some argue that restricted access to research sites is an increasingly prevalent obstacle within both undergraduate programmes and graduate programmes. What makes the issue even more problematic is that in the teacher education programmes of Sweden, Norway and Finland students must perform a scientific empirical study to pass the final exam (Johansen, 2011; Johansson & Svedner, 2006; Kansanen, 2003). Further, teacher training departments in the USA and the UK emphasise the importance of gaining access to research sites as they include elements from teaching practice in teacher-training programmes (i.e., assessing candidates’ field experience logs and reflective journals) (D. M. o. Education, 2008; D. o. T. Education, 2011).

In my case, I started to try to obtain a rough idea of how the research field and research methodologies actually describe the access problem. If there are such descriptions, what do they highlight? I was also attending a PhD course (Scheman, 2009) as part of my graduate studies during this period and I began to wonder whether that course might be helpful in trying to understand this complicated problem. Since part of the course content analyses so-called community-based research (Scheman, 2001, 2008; Jordan et al., 2005), this made me think of access to sites as not simply a question of the methodical application of communication strategies but also as being conceptually embedded in research practice. I thus wondered what some philosophers of science would think about access. What would they highlight and think and feel about the research field and research methodology?

**Aim of this paper**

This paper explores ways that might allow researchers (and students) to gain linguistic access to qualitative research fields. Two research questions drive this exploration:

- How is the access problem described in journal articles and books on research methodology and what has been highlighted?
- What would some philosophers of science think about access and what would they highlight in relation to the research field and its methodologies?

Initially, the presentation of the analysis model is followed by a short review of articles and books addressing the first question. The next part of the paper briefly presents two philosophers of science, followed by (suggested) answers to the second question. The conclusion and discussion analyse the results of the literature review along with the thinking of two philosophers of science in relation to the central aim of this paper.

**Reviewing the literature**

The primary purpose of the following literature review is to provide a rough and preliminary picture of the research field that focuses on the access problem. It does
not claim to be comprehensive. Following Creswell’s (2003) recommendations, it gives priority to articles in open access journals available via databases like Web of Science and EBSCO. The review involves modes of access that are primarily verbal and does not address forms that do not entail linguistic communication. Examples of search terms were “access to research” and “gaining linguistic access”, but then the articles primarily addressed disabled people’s access problems in society in many search hits. Other examples of non-relevant hits when using these search terms are articles describing research in fields such as medicine, economics, and information communication technologies.

Eventually, 11 articles in international journals relevant to the current subject – the access problem – appeared. One article was published in 1985, two articles were published during the 1990s, and eight articles were published after the turn of the millennium. Given that only 11 relevant articles seemed to be too low a number, the search process was extended to include the use of backwards or ancestry searches (Hill & Tyson, 2009) exploring reference lists of the articles that led to a book chapter and one book on the subject. In order to broaden my understanding of these articles and books, I included reference books on research methodology that are common in Swedish educational research, such as 15 works generally oriented to the social sciences, supplemented with three handbooks on scientific writing that address students in teacher training programmes, sociology, and social work in Sweden. In summary, this means that the search results reflect an apparent lack of literature approaching the problem stated above and thus lead to an analysis based on a limited amount of data.

**Analysis model**

There are several meanings of access to research. In laboratory research, access does not require verbal communication; the object under examination is usually to be understood in terms of separateness, and problems with access may involve technical causes and/or limitations. But when it comes to qualitative research on human beings, access is mainly linguistic since it involves a question of acquiring entry to their verbal communication, as it “requires being in a position to learn from the people you’re talking with and observing” (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003, p. vii). Moreover, people – as complex and social organisms – need to be understood in context, not in abstractions from their physical and social environments, and research needs access to such contextual understanding (Scheman, 2008). Therefore, a relational perspective is necessary to understand the fundamental nature of access (Feldman et al., 2003, p. vii). Accordingly, the starting point for this analysis is the question, “How is the issue of gaining access problematised in articles in the research field, in literature on research methodology, and by philosophers of science?” Based on social constructivism, discourse analysis aims to conduct critical research on power relationships in society (Winter, Jörgensen & Phillips, 2000, p. 8). A research enterprise can be
seen as a discursive practice, and issues of access can thus be framed as part of the communication process within this practice.

Following Fairclough (1995), communication can be examined as a combination of power and rhetoric. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), it can be understood as part of a process that forms the meanings of, for example, power, entirely within the discourse. Inspired by these perspectives, the issues of access are framed as part of the communication process within a research enterprise in this analysis. In the second step, I consider whether a consensus or a conflict view of communication is prevalent by asking, “Does power matter?”. Consensus means that collective agreements based on good arguments comprise the principal object of all communication within the research enterprise, while a conflict perspective explores the productive use of conflict by emphasising different power relations.

**Journal articles and books on research methodology describing access**

*Those that do not do not explicitly comment upon access to the field*

The majority of writers covering this issue considers the access problem in the methodological discourse as largely absent and as not being discussed in much depth (Adler & Adler, 2001; Brennan, 2008; Feldman, et al., 2003). Previous explanations of access are presented in a fragmented and simplified way without any conceptual bridge linking to a coherent and theoretical perspective on the matter (Feldman et al., 2003; Harrington, 2003; Okumus, Altinay, & Roper, 2007). In this review, the majority of books presented as reference books on research methodology and handbooks on scientific writing confirm this claim by not explicitly commenting on access to the field. However, when addressing the ethnographic approach, access may be reviewed, for example, by stating that “the problem of access to research and to the data needed pops up in ethnographic studies” (Dovemark, 2007, p. 136).

*Gaining access is a matter of communication*

The articles considering problems of gaining access use anthropology and/or ethnography in qualitative research as a common feature and this approach is reflected in a smaller number of books on research methodology. By emphasising the intense nature of the relationships established between the researcher and the researched (Burgess, 1985), ethnography considers access as the practical use of communication strategies through which the researcher should exercise skills for building relationships, managing personal appearance, and building rapport (Measor, 1985). Thus, the literature describes communication strategies, such as the process of “getting in” and mastering the art of “staying” (Adler & Adler, 2001; Burgess, 1985; Candlin, 2003; Feldman et al., 2003). Examples of other communication strategies are handling information given in confidence or given as an act of resistance and seek-
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ing mentorship from experienced researchers who are already trusted. Fortunately, researchers can manage this subversive information through alternate approaches during interviews that aim to establish trust and rapport (Adler & Adler, 2001; Ball, 1985). However, managing access problems by using these strategies merely focuses on the traditional execution of the research practice. Eventually, this approach has become overshadowed by questions of negotiating legitimacy and logistical problems even before entering the setting. This has caused the focus on access to expand and consider such factors outside of actual research practice as exerting an influence on the methodology. Ultimately, a relational view in the field has extended the notion of access as integrally connected to the research design in terms of the execution of choices already made in the design process (Adler & Adler, 2001; Feldman et al., 2003). Depending on whether different kinds of power dimensions associated with people in the research enterprise are viewed by the researchers as exerting an influence or not, this study suggests two perspectives on the communication process of managing access.

Consensus

The consensus perspective considers communication as not linked to dimensions of power, assuming researchers and participants share some mutual interest in the research enterprise and see reciprocity as an expected part of the research situation (Gurney, 1985; Measor, 1985; Patton, 1987, 1988). This means adopting an instrumental perspective based on mutual agreements of using reciprocal procedures that facilitate communication. Shenton and Hayter recommend a number of strategies or tactics for gaining access, such as to “seek to blend in with the community,” “acknowledge openly the value of informants’ contributions” and “ensuring some element of reciprocity is a key ingredient in several of the strategies” (Shenton & Hayter, 2004, pp. 225, 230). Other examples of instrumentality views may be the “payoff” perspective on access, defined as the information trade and/or battles taking place in media research (Brennan, 2008) and the guidelines applied in research on bereaved people using ethical criteria such as informed consent and rigorous methodology (Parkes, 1995).1

Conflict

The conflict perspective sees thinking of access as relational and considers human communication connected to the production of power and knowledge as situated in a local context. A conflict perspective is thus critical for considering reciprocity as tactics or procedures that facilitate communication because this perspective simplifies the access process into a matter of stages and required skills by adopting a range of strategies and/or policies (Ely, 1993; Okumus, et al., 2007; Shenton & Hayter, 2004). Instead, access should be viewed as situated in a continual process of negotiation in which conflicting interests and actors in opposition must always be taken into account (Laurila, 1997). Describing the researcher-respondent relationship as
cooperative could obscure exploitation and hidden power structures. These shortcomings of the cooperative view “suggest the need for reconceptualization of access in terms not limited by identity assumptions” (Harrington, 2003, p. 597; Lather, 1986). Access can be gained through so-called “reciprocal exposure” (i.e., the researcher’s willingness to be questioned by potential respondents) (Bolognani, 2007) and should be analysed as a process that develops throughout the course of the study (Adler & Adler, 2001; Hamzeh & Oliver, 2010). In order to complicate and add nuance to the ethnographic conceptualisation of access, Harrington (2003) recommends the use of social psychology as a way to reframe the researcher-participant relation. By using “informed improvisation” for managing access, the approach becomes consistent with the symbolic interactionist view of social structures as processual, contingent and enacted (Hall, 1987; Harrington, 2003, p. 595).

This literature review found that a communication perspective seems to activate relational views that challenge the process of access by means of either a consensus or a conflicting perspective. The question is therefore whether this relationality is restricted to the research practice or if it manifests in a larger context.

The next section of this paper presents two philosophers of science and speculates what they would think about the problem of access and what they would emphasise in relation to the research field and research methodologies. Since the issue of gaining access to people’s communication is central to this study, the choice of these persons is based on their common interest in these subjects as expressed in some of their original texts. Naomi Scheman, the object of my PhD course, is currently working in feminist and other liberatory epistemology, stressing social structures’ influence on relationships in human knowledge practices. As she views conflict as often a necessary component of change, she emphasises a conflict perspective on communication. Through the idea that we learn from different perspectives, my strategy has been to find a counterweight to this position. According to the analytical model above, this is the consensus perspective on communication, a position that is primarily represented by Jurgen Habermas. While still emphasising contextual significance, but from a consensus perspective, it seemed relevant to choose him as the other philosopher of science.

**Philosophers of science thinking about access**

**Habermas**

Communication is a key word in Habermas’ philosophy, which assumes that communicative reason makes itself felt in the binding force of intersubjective understanding and reciprocal recognition (Habermas, 1996, p. 613). Habermas (1984) describes the system’s colonisation of the lifeworld as a rationalisation process in terms of expertise; social engineering; and the narrow, positivist belief that science is a solution to the problems of society. This can be offset by a rationalisation of the lifeworld by using
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science to develop an emancipatory cognitive interest that questions society’s creations of norms and meaning. One of the main ways to do this is through the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, 1996). People learn from one another through a mutual interaction in a social context, using language and communication, and they test different ideas and norms spread by the system (Habermas, 1984). Communication acts coordinate action and contribute to interaction. Communicative action depends on situational contexts that represent segments of the lifeworld of the participants in the interaction. The communication procedure is a precondition for a democratic dialogue characterised by openness, strategic behaviour, and a state of communicative rationality. The key in reaching this state is to create opportunities for undistorted communication, wherein the individual’s competence and reflective ability are essential.

The theory of communicative action assumes that every discussion can be understood by others as truthful and sincere when the participants use certain social rights or norms. Such dialogue characterises undistorted communication. No practice – power, status, manipulation, fear or insecurity – affects the participants’ understanding more than the strength of a good, well-founded argument. According to Habermas (1984), this discourse is propelled by a unifying and consensus-building force that helps the participants to overcome their initially subjective and biased views in favour of the rationally motivated agreement. If every claim of knowledge is open to challenge, then different experts’ statements can be communicatively grounded, which means they are accorded reasonable influence in relation to people who are not experts. The ideal situation of genuine consensus emerges if there is a symmetrical distribution of opportunities to choose and to apply speech acts. This gives rise to the opposite of undistorted communication: social actions that draw on empirical pragmatics that have no conceptual (formal-pragmatic) instruments with which to recognise rational communication. The result of this is the manifestation of communication pathologies, such as systematically distorted communication and manipulation (Habermas, 1984, pp. 331–333). This kind of communication comprises actions of the system that stretch beyond its range of validity and colonises a space for communicative actions (Habermas, 1987), which is one of the reasons that Habermas is not primarily empirically oriented. An overly strong emphasis on interpreting the empirical material leads to only reduced aspects of different phenomena being illustrated, as they do not include the communicative processes or the social conditions set in the background of the participants and in their subconscious, making the results of the interviews unclear.

The comprehensive nature of Habermas’ approach intertwines views on research methodology with theoretical and philosophical concepts that draw together all of the ideas about gaining access from interpretations made by the author of this paper. One possible starting point may be the notion that communicative action is dependent on both situational contexts and interacting participants, which emphasises a relational view of the communication process as it considers factors outside of actual research.
practice. At first sight, this approach seems to correspond with the conflict perspective that recognises that the plurality and diversity of minds in practical conditions (e.g., a research enterprise) are politically and culturally determined by the surrounding contexts. But how does Habermas’ relational view work when it comes to actual research practice and thus to the issue of access? Habermas pictures the communication procedure as something strictly linked to rational thinking, one’s competence, and one’s reflective ability. This grounds his relational views chiefly in a process that is purely intellectual, letting no contextual practices such as power relations affect understanding. He asserts that every statement in the communication procedure should be communicatively grounded and that it should also be open to challenge from various speakers. These qualities seem to suggest an open and inclusive attitude regarding practical questions dealing with participation and thus with access. But the focus on the communication process links the strength of a good, well-founded argument to theoretical instead of practical dimensions. That is, it deals with challenges from various speakers primarily as a matter of choosing and applying speech acts in an effort to establish the ideal of perfect communication, rather than as something related to actual research practice.

Due to his preoccupation with communication and the rational agreement of all participants in an entirely rational, unlimited discourse, Habermas does not answer the question of how this idealised condition of an agreement through perfect rational discourse can be achieved in practice. He requires a conceptual instrument to recognise rational communication and to avoid distortion. This instrument favours competence and reflective ability that correspond with the mutual agreement in the consensus perspective that uses reciprocal procedures to facilitate communication and thus access. But neither case considers the influence of power relations and both therefore omit valuable sources of knowledge within the communication procedure. One cannot expect to conduct a realistic analysis if one disregards power, as then one would not be sensitive to the social context and the status dimensions influencing dialogue in the research enterprise; this, in turn, would mean that the enterprise would be deprived of some of its potential (e.g., the ability to interpret and recognise women’s subordination and/or actions with no corporate aim or explicit fulfilment). Therefore, the claim that the process of unanimous conviction is crucial for practical agreements in teaching practice must be a weak spot in the consensus perspective on communication. Further, applying a vision of teachers as persons who have no conceptual instruments to recognise rational communication makes it difficult for researchers to maintain didactic credibility, thereby restricting their access to participants who currently exhibit an increase in didactic and scientific awareness through their teacher training programmes.

It may therefore seem that Habermas has little to contribute to the access problem because he only employs theoretical and philosophical dimensions. Nonetheless, the contextual dimension in his approach is crucial as it defines various influences
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on research that do not necessarily fall into the categories of methodological rigour or skill. Habermas includes relational views and frames them with an emancipatory interest by considering the historical and social scenery that could enforce attitudes of scholars’ perceptions of research methodology and enforce access as something relationally integrated within the research process and, most importantly, in the surrounding context.

**Scheman**

According to Naomi Scheman (2005), the crucial dimensions of methodology are linked to general questions about the trust placed on current research by the taxpayers, particularly since public research universities play an important role as providers of reliable information, while they also depend on state funding. Scheman suggests one explanation of the states’ steadily declining support for higher education: a virulently spreading cynical climate concerning authority, especially with regard to experts doing research. Scheman claims that problems of access chiefly stem from a question of the mistrust of researchers across the board. Such mistrust stems from the style of the conventional scientific method. Jordan, Gust, and Scheman (2005) argue for a major change to the approach in community-based research (using terms such as “action research”) as a means of instilling trust in the research enterprise. The value of any research is a direct and primary effect of its “trustworthiness” – whether people will find it useful enough both individually and in joint projects. However, people’s image of research and research practices is under the strong influence of a laboratory science discourse, even when the research is about human interactions. Procedures for measuring and controlling for confusing variables that threaten the objectivity of the research may be appropriate when dealing with research objects that can be distilled, filtered or quantified (Jordan et al., 2005). However, science still holds research on people to standard laboratory norms, a position that creates problems because these standards erase important dimensions of human interactions that make a marked difference if we are serious about social, ethical and political trustworthiness (Jordan et al., 2005). As a solution, Scheman suggests redefining the defining virtue of modern science – objectivity – as trustworthiness which requires the responsible engagement of the researcher, meaning a willingness to listen to and learn from the participants involved in research projects. Scheman suggests involving people without any academic training because she asserts that objectivity as trustworthiness has to do with how widespread the public’s support is for scientific claims and how convinced people are that these claims are reasonable. Recognising that these claims are affected by aspects such as the social location of the people involved, Scheman considers power to be the main issue.

In community-based research, members of the community actively participate in a partnership with progressive researchers by using distinct scientific methods and, in contrast to traditional research which makes the researcher more powerful than
other persons involved, sharing power is a key to overcoming mistrust in community-based research. The idea is to regard the participants’ intuitive knowledge, latest skills and learned experience valued as being equally important as the competence of the researchers. When it comes to the question of trust, Scheman states that we can strengthen our confidence in scientific results by building up a trust-grounding practice that changes the image of research as something only geared toward certified experts. By democratising our knowledge practices, community-based research is including the social context which makes it possible to ground knowledge claims acceptable to all of us and not only to people who are privileged as a result of gender, class and ethnicity. A number of alternative systematic procedures are able to accomplish this, including critical, contextual, political, participatory, pluralist and relational procedures (Scheman, 2001, p. 26). When it comes to questions of research integrity, both the researchers and the community members collaborate in a common process of education and justification in which the community members act as co-investigators, contributing to the research by providing deeper information and knowledge. By participating in the interpretation of data, the research group can overcome cultural and language barriers and thus prevent oversimplification. This will ultimately contribute to an application of data that utilises research findings to make changes in society. The social arenas participating in this provide feedback about the use of data, and doing this confirms a kind of ecological validity.

Scheman criticises conventional research practices that reproduce traditional power relationships and create mistrust. Her analysis confirms the relational views emphasised by the conflict perspective on communication, while highlighting this relationality as not restricted solely to the research process and practice. Instead, she stresses the importance of framing these views in a larger context as essential to carrying out research. What is at stake is whether it is possible to control communication through some kind of rationality geared towards an ideal condition. Scheman shows that contextual factors cannot be managed solely by means of methodological skills as they leave critical communication problems unresolved, for example, the very problem of gaining access. But when she transforms and integrates these communication problems into a larger framework that emphasises different dimensions of power and diversity influencing the research enterprise, she makes it possible to consider access as relational to the surrounding context. Understanding the world as composed of people with diverse perspectives on a common object, her analysis argues that truth claims rest largely on socially grounded reasons for trust. By using alternative systematic procedures, including gender and diversity dimensions, she challenges the standard norms of the traditional laboratory science discourse. Thus, her work establishes a trust-grounding practice based on a conflict perspective on communication that makes it possible to ground knowledge claims that seem acceptable to all people.

As a result, the question of access becomes intertwined with a larger matrix that traditional research methodology cannot possibly capture. Instead, gender and diver-
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Conclusions and discussion
In this section of the paper, we return to the initial question of what went wrong with the communication between the school and myself. What can we conclude after consulting the literature and the two philosophers of science on this problem? What might the latter have suggested for solving this particular problem? And, finally, what did I learn from this event?

According to the consensus perspective in the literature, the communication process went wrong chiefly because of me. The consensus perspective reduces the researcher’s role, making him/her solely responsible for attempts to obtain access, as it highlights a number of communication skills that I should apply during my research process. By identifying various kinds of mutual interests that are shared in the research enterprise, I would make it possible to design some appropriate strategies that would facilitate access. I was unable to do this in advance, so I simply lacked bait when I asked for access. Consulting Habermas on this role did not highlight the problem with respect to concrete researcher-gatekeeper-participant relations and to issues of power in fieldwork. His approach does not consider social context and diversity influencing the dialogue because it does include consensus. His notion of a normalised communicative rationality creates a closed system that is not accessible to people with dissenting types of rationality, and it does not allow for the plurality that is fundamental to the understanding of human relations. Thus, the question of access to communication between humans in fieldwork would not be characterised by perspectives on power. Using Habermas as an interpretative lens makes me blind to my own “normality” and insensitive to people with dissenting rationalities. I do not find Habermas to be of any help at all in obtaining access to fieldwork.

According to the conflict perspective in literature, the notion of mutual interests could dim exploitation and hidden power structures. The conflict perspective recognises different dimensions of power that have an impact on the relation between people involved in research, stating that a person cannot control his or her communication process independently. It stresses the notion of the development and use of communicative strategies, although it applies no instrumental views specifically centred on required skills. Reframing the researcher-participant relation as situated in a process characterised by conflicting interests and constant negotiations means that I, as a researcher, am not solely responsible for getting access.

This emphasis on context leads to the next philosopher of science reviewed here, Naomi Scheman. Because she feels that research practice corresponds to context and that this correspondence is fundamental, her answer to my problem about gain-
ing access is obvious: If the researchers are trusted by people in the field, they will gain access. By highlighting the trust-grounding practice as a way to democratise knowledge practices through the inclusion of the social context, she provides practical solutions to the access problem. Rather than applying the consensus perspective, which assumes the influence of power, gender and diversity as examples of distorted communication, Scheman uses a conflict perspective that recognises these influences as crucial because they contribute opinions, knowledge and practical proposals that reflect the practice and diversity of the community. Making productive use of these conflicting relations provides functional guidance for how to embed issues of access into research practice and comprises a credible response to the aim of this paper, that is, to explore ways that researchers (and students) may gain linguistic access to qualitative research fields.

As the philosophers of science jointly perceive research as an activity aiming to find new, previously unknown opportunities and approaches that do not reproduce an already known world, the political dimension of research and access becomes clear. The majority of writers in the field, as well as the philosophers, stress the conflicting ways in which a research enterprise relates to the surrounding context, and thus their notion of access can be interpreted as being conceptually integrated in the research enterprise as a whole, not considered as an isolated step in a methodological process. The political dimensions of government policy that pervade and steer school practices through framing factors represent rationalities that intersect with other rationalities. Examples are local and national discourses on resource allocation, teaching, gender and diversity that all influence access. As the traditional laboratory science discourse still prevails, demanding instrumentality and theoretical rigour and – important in the context of the school – demanding the valuable time of teachers, it will conflict with alternative views that consider research as a corporate source providing new knowledge supporting the practice of the organisation. Thus, the door to a research setting like a school can remain closed, regardless of the extent to which the researcher can apply communicative strategies and talent.

One possible solution applies a trust-grounding practice that corresponds to the Scheman model of research: It may be a joint venture (e.g., researchers, students and teachers investigating, analysing and supporting shared and perhaps already started projects in the school). In this way, researchers can facilitate access by using starting points in a conflict perspective on communication, apply the idea of the trust-grounding practice, and emphasise a diversity of participants’ collaborating in and thus supporting the educational practice. These increasing elements of diversity can thereby challenge various hidden power structures in fieldwork. The process of research itself is empowering to the participants as they can participate in framing “more useful (…) stories about themselves, rather than leaving that framing in the hands of researchers or more socially, economically, and politically powerful others” (Scheman, 2008). Acting as co-investigators, the teachers in school jointly participate
in the interpretation of data, which helps to ground knowledge claims and strengthens the research validity through inclusive processes that are sensitive to issues of access.

What I learned from this episode was that to gain access I should have visited the school and the teachers more often so I could get involved in their activities and learn more about how they perceived their teaching practice. In accordance with the idea of trust-grounding practice, I could have argued that both teachers and the new principal could have benefited from participating in my study while developing their school organisation. Then, I might have been able to offer my help and support to any studies that were already initiated in this school. In my case, however, I was unable to do so because I had to participate in a basic research training course during this time, which shows that some of the problems of gaining access are also associated with the structure of doctoral education.

To conclude, methodological, scientific, philosophical and political views on the matter confirm that the gaining of access extends far beyond the simple “combination of planning and dumb luck” (Van Maanen & Kolb, 1985, p. 11), showing there is no easy answer to this complicated research problem. Thus, discussing this issue from a consensus and conflict perspective should be considered as a simplification. However, the main purpose of this analysis is that it will hopefully serve as a first-aid kit to those researchers who, like me, have been “dumped” by the gatekeeper. Further studies can broaden and deepen knowledge of the access problem by using, for example, critical ethnography.

Notes

1 The issue of research ethics is not addressed in this paper. However, it may be noted that some researchers consider the establishment of institutional review boards (IRBs), which are mandated to approve, observe and review individual research plans, as a process that has advantages in terms of gaining access since it seeks to establish trust and rapport with informants and helps applicants to develop relationships with those who give permission to pursue the research (Feldman et al., 2003).
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