Qualitative Social Work

Revealing the hidden performances of social work practice: The ethnographic process of gaining access, getting into place and impression management.

Journal:	*Qualitative Social Work*
Manuscript ID	QSW-20-0046.R1
Manuscript Type:	Main Paper
Keywords:	Ethnography, Access, Empirical practice, Dramaturgy, Emotional labour, Impression management

Abstract:	Whilst the empirical process of research highlights substantive findings, understanding the methodological approach in which access is gained and sustained on field sites is also an integral part of the data. Gaining access in ethnographic studies, in particular, is a complex task which requires researchers to continually negotiate systems and processes in order that they may reflect on the socially embedded practices of their chosen fields. However once the researchers are accepted, the ethnographer then has to be aware of the effect their presence has on the field and that access is continual process of negotiation and contestation. Based on a longitudinal study which conducted a 15-month ethnography in two social work organizations, this article will explore the dilemmas various members of a research team experienced when trying to blend into the different sites. And then, once having achieved their desired position, the challenges they encountered when they realized their presence was affecting the performances of their participants. We conclude by discussing the importance of reflexivity, power and ethics. Ethnographic research may be a more natural way for researchers to collect data but it is also a method which positions researchers in situations where they can easily influence encounters and, in effect, become part of the findings as well.

Revealing the hidden performances of social work practice: The ethnographic process of gaining access, getting into place and impression management.

Abstract

Whilst the empirical process of research highlights substantive findings, understanding the methodological approach in which access is gained and sustained on field sites is also an integral part of the data. Gaining access in ethnographic studies, in particular, is a complex task which requires researchers to continually negotiate systems and processes in order that they may reflect on the socially embedded practices of their chosen fields. However once the researchers are accepted, the ethnographer then has to be aware of the effect their presence has on the field and that access is continual process of negotiation and contestation. Based on a longitudinal study which conducted a 15-month ethnography in two social work organizations, this article will explore the dilemmas various members of a research team experienced when trying to blend into the different sites. And then, once having achieved their desired position, the challenges they encountered when they realized their presence was affecting the performances of their participants. We conclude by

discussing the importance of reflexivity, power and ethics. Ethnographic research may be a more natural way for researchers to collect data but it is also a method which positions researchers in situations where they can easily influence encounters and, in effect, become part of the findings as well.

Keywords: Ethnography; Gaining access; Performativity; Dramaturgy; Emotional labour; Impression Management; Goffman

Introduction

Ethnography is a qualitative method that can be used to describe how a culture works as it captures the routine and everyday activities of people who occupy a particular place (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It is a tool which also enables researchers to gain meaning of such social practices from the perspective of the participant. It goes beyond the surface of that which is presented to produce a 'thick description' of the events which take place in the field (Geertz, 1973; Taylor, 2011). In turn, ethnographers usually have frequent contact with participants and the site over a sustained period of time. This level of contact

assists researchers in recognising the specific routines, activities and institutional practices that take place and are not always visible to the outsider.

Ethnography is a method which also accepts that an individual's biography and affective experiences are not only constructed and reconstructed through research (Coffey, 1999) but are also activities which allow qualitative researchers to challenge their own subjectivity in relation to that which is being studied (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge- Freeman, 2016; Taylor, 2011). One feature of ethnography which is often identified as being particularly complex, both physically and emotionally, is the subject of gaining access; an activity which involves entering the field and establishing rapport with research participants. Although it is widely recognized that this aspect of research is vitally important in terms of establishing relationships and collecting data, it is not always explicitly discussed but rather something that researchers are expected to master (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2015).

In this article, we make the aspects of gaining access explicit and take the view that if we are to better understand how we affect the field then issues surrounding entry and acceptance need to be considered when naturalistic research is planned and delivered (Cohen et al., 2000; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). Pinsky

(2013) once suggested that qualitative research methods are still strongly influenced by the positivist model of a distanced researcher rigidly following a predetermined research design. If correct, then this limited view leaves ethnographers with little room for reporting the actual messiness of their methodologies (see Harrowell et al. 2018).

In this context therefore, rather than reject the messiness we encountered, we accept it and examine the methodological complexities we were faced with as a path to improve and make transparent the way in which qualitative research is conducted. We contribute to ethnographic literature by contemplating our collective experiences of carrying out a multi-site ethnography, with particular emphasis on the process of gaining access and then accounting for the researcher presence once access was gained. Both of these activities were challenging for us in different ways and our aim is to use this paper to explore why we experienced the encounters that we did and in doing so, contribute to the methodological debate on ethnography.

While we recognise that we cannot answer this point conclusively without directly asking our participants, we attempt to theorize the effect we had on the field using the model of theatrical performance, better known as 'the dramaturgical

perspective' (see Goffman, 1959). Although gaining access and the researcher effect are two aspects of ethnography that are increasingly being discussed in methodological accounts, both are rarely discussed in empirical articles (Reeves, 2010). We argue that alongside substantive findings, the methodological process of ethnographic fieldwork is a factor that plays an integral part in research because when made transparent it sheds new light on the data that has been collected.

Gaining access and positionality

The ethnographic literature on gaining access to participants and understanding the effect researchers have on their findings is broad and ever growing. Recent studies have tended to focus on the researcher's position in relation to the population group they are studying and how power-laden differences have the potential to disrupt the way in which a study is conducted.

For example, Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2016) used the Lofland et al. (2006) analytical frameworks of credibility and approachability to better understand their experiences of 'getting in' and 'getting along' in the field. In doing

so, they illustrate how as women of colour they negotiated their identities to gain and maintain access to the field. They demonstrate that accepted binary assumptions such as the insider- outsider dynamic, are dual positions which neglect the voices of those in between and on the margin groups who can also negotiate the intricacies of studying individuals who occupy different social positions.

In contrast, Gil (2010) used his experiences of gaining access to explore the reactions he encountered from 'saboteur' informants who blurred the boundaries between 'field' and 'home', or 'native' and 'expert' when he attempted to carry out research on the birth, development, dismantling and destruction of an anthropology course in Argentina during the 1970s with colleagues in his own academic field. Not deterred by the regular conflicts he was met with, Gil (2010) found that other contributors transcended their role of informant to become co-producers simply because research projects can also foster interaction with experts outside of the academic field.

Taking a slightly different approach to both Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2016) and Gil (2010), Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) moved away from focusing on identity and the behaviour of others to examining the different kinds

of emotional labour they engaged in when trying to gain, secure and maintain access to the field. In carrying out research with the Swedish judiciary they realised that their strategies relied on their ability to use surface (emotional expression) and deep (emotional experience) acting to adjust to cultural or situational feeling rules when trying to cope with the emotive dissonance between their research persona and their 'authentic' self.

As these studies demonstrate, the identity, position and behaviour of researchers often (unwittingly) shape the way in which access is gained and maintained in the field. Although the researcher may set the initial project agenda, access to the data depends on the way in which the researcher negotiates reluctant gatekeepers; 'saboteur' informants as well as the effect of their own performances. However, in addition, the authors of these studies make important parallels between substantive and methodological issues as they highlight that reflexivity is an approach which not only helps the researcher analyse how data are gathered but also how it is influenced by the researcher's presence. Reflexivity acknowledges the mutual relationship between the ethnographer and the object of study.

In this article, we take a slightly different approach by exploring the contingent process of negotiating access and then examining the researcher's presence during fieldwork. The latter activity was particularly noticeable in our study because there were, in effect, two sets of contrasting participants: social workers and families. Both held different positions in the project due to the nature of their relationship with one another. But what was of interest to us was the way in which our presence sometimes affected the way in which the social worker performed in front of us and also the family. Using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective and 'getting into place' theory (Goffman, 1989), we explore the rationale behind some of the performances we engaged in and were presented with which prompted further team discussions on reflexivity, power and ethics.

The study

Our longitudinal study aimed to explore the nature and dynamics of face to face encounters between social workers and families and how this was influenced by organisational life, staff support and supervision (see Ferguson et al, 2019). The fieldwork took place in two local authorities in England over a period of 15 months.

One site was a hot-desking office (a system which involves multiple workers using a single physical work station during different time periods) which used a large open-plan room to accommodate 60 staff, who did not have an allocated desk but used what was available on the day. The second site was, in contrast, urban with a more traditional office design. Practitioners at this site were based in small team rooms which accommodated between 5 and 10 staff all of whom had a desk of their own.

The research questions were developed in order that we could explore the dynamics and processes that occurred in social work practice. We were also interested in whether there was focus on children's safety by families and professionals as well as if social workers and other professionals were able to effectively engage and maintain relationships with children and parents over the longer-term. In particular, we were interested in understanding the way in which interactions played out, both in the home setting between social workers and families and in the office between social workers and their teams.

In order to unearth the detail of these encounters and interactions in two different sites, we employed an ethnographic case study design. Goffman (1989) once argued that for researchers to get deeply familiar with the field and be present

during the unanticipated events, they needed to be in the field for one year or longer. In line with Goffman, we agreed that if we were to generate a coherent understanding of what was happening on both sites, we needed to observe what social workers did over a period of a year or longer. We hoped that this longitudinal approach to data collection would enable us to generate meaningful data as we would be able to observe social workers inside the office and yet also follow them outside when they were carrying out home visits or attending professional meetings.

The team consisted of six researchers, five of whom were qualified social workers. Whilst the sixth was not a social worker, he was a geographer who had completed research in social care settings. Two of the six researchers were stationed at each of the sites during the field work stage: a research fellow and principal investigator at one setting; a research fellow and co-investigator at the other. Their roles were basically to recruit and manage a sample of 15 cases at each site; observe interactions between social worker and family and also the organisational practices that subtly enveloped the two parties. The other two researchers were not stationed at any particular site but they occasionally visited the

field once the project was underway. Their roles were more connected to the analysis and impact stages rather than playing a part in the collection of data.

The main participants in our study were both social workers and the families they worked with. It was the difference between the roles these two groups played that helped us to recognise the different performances being exhibited- all of which we now recognise were affected by our position in the field and contributed to some of the ethical predicaments we faced. Participant observation of social workers in interaction with families and other professionals were aspects of the data collection process that specifically interested us. To gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives, observations were paired with interviews so as to provide both social workers and families with the opportunity to speak candidly about their experiences and the challenges they encountered in social work practice.

These interviews were initially supported with a pre-devised interview schedule to ensure that there was consistency across the two sites. However, as time progressed and we became more familiar with the participants and the fields, our interviews evolved and became more reflexive; often specifically tailored towards understanding particular interactions that the participant had been involved in.

Ethnographic studies distinguish themselves from other research methods due to the naturalistic approach they employ, one which seeks to grasp the subjective meanings and perspectives of the people participating in the culture being observed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; 2007). In this study, we wanted to do the same and organically respond to findings by delving deeper into each presenting situation to gain an array of perspectives on what was happening and why.

Negotiating access and getting into place

Procuring entry into particular organisations and ensuring that the individuals associated with it (such as employees or service users) will serve as informants, is an integral element of ethnography (Shenton and Hayter, 2004). However, this activity can also be counterproductive because those we wish to gain access to may view the researcher as an intruder, a nuisance or a spy (Czarniawska, 1998; Plankey-Videla, 2012; Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Indeed, Goffman contended that 'getting into place' was a process which involved researchers subjecting themselves, their bodies, their personalities and their own social situations to a set of contingencies that already played on a group of people in a variety of contexts

(Goffman, 1989). In order to successfully gain access therefore, Goffman felt that the researcher needed to appreciate that within any setting participants may behave quite differently due to the context they were in:

> A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course…Here the team can run through its performance, checking for offending expressions when no audience is present to be affronted by them; here poor members of a team, who are expressively inept, can be schooled or dropped from the performance. Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines and step out of character (Goffman, 1959: 114-115).

Goffman (1959) developed the theory of dramaturgy and its principles whilst carrying out anthropological fieldwork in the Shetland Isles. As a sociologist Goffman was inherently interested in how the self, as a social product, depended on validation awarded and withheld in accordance with the norms of a stratified society (Manning, 2002). In the extract above he illustrates this argument by making reference to the settings he observed in his own ethnographic studies. He found that the presentations that individuals performed were undertaken in two distinct areas: the front region and the back region (Goffman, 1959). In the front region, Goffman observed performances as more formal and restrained in nature, whereas in the

back region, performances were more relaxed and informal and thus allowed the individual to step out of their front region character. However, Goffman also felt that individuals used the back stage to prepare for front stage performances. Each region therefore had different rules of behaviour: the back region is where the show is prepared and rehearsed, the front region is where the performance is presented to another audience.

In our study we were interested in two areas where social work practice took place: the backstage, where the social work teams were situated and the front stage, the spaces where they interacted with families and other professionals. Although we had been granted ethical approval by the lead University and the organisations involved, we knew from previous ethnographic experiences that if we were to gain access effectively to the sites we needed to draw on the rules of getting into place by first of all, blending in.

We were acutely aware that blending into both back and front stage settings was going to present us with challenges primarily because social work is 'an inherently invisible trade' (Pithouse, 1987: 4). First, the majority of social work practice that takes place with families is often unobserved by colleagues or

managers. Second, by the nature of the work, social work practice and its outcomes are habitually uncertain and ambiguous. Third, social work practitioners rely on taken for granted assumptions to accomplish their daily work (Pithouse, 1998). And fourth, social work practice remains invisible in the public domain because social workers are rarely able to talk about their experiences due to issues of confidentiality (Leigh, 2017).

Inserting a team of strangers into a site where confidentiality, accountability and privacy were deemed paramount was not going to be easy nor would it be the best way for us to start to build relationships with participants. We recognised that before we could commence the process of blending in, we needed to first introduce ourselves to the sites and seek consent from those we wanted to observe. Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) have called this initial part of gaining access 'exploring the field', that is doing the preparatory work with people already 'in the know'. Although we had been granted permission by senior members of each organisation, we realised that if we were to enter either of the sites, we needed to meet and inform our participants (the social workers and their managers) of what the research would

entail in the hope that they would then permit us to observe them both front stage and back stage.

This introductory activity took place at each of the field sites and despite leaving each initial visit feeling positive and enthusiastic, we were not too surprised to learn that there was one site that was explicitly more cautious. We had learned during introductions at the site that there were issues surrounding poor retention and high turnover of staff as well as some unfavourable feedback from families in relation to the service they received from social workers. The concerns expressed in relation to our research mainly centred on our presence in the field: how the data would be collected and the impact the research would have on the social workers and the families they were working with. Both were valid concerns, and we were careful to respond to each sensitively and with as much detail as we possibly could. It was not long afterwards that we learned that they had agreed the date of when the research would begin.

Blending in

It was during our official entry to the field when we learned that although the teams and the local authorities had granted us access, at one of the sites what this actually provided us with was simply 'permission to be present in the building'. Gaining 'full' access was going to prove to be a far more complex task. The building in which hot-desking took place consisted of many different teams, all of which were spread across a number of floors. Each floor had an identical design: partitioned walled sections which separated area teams from one another. Trying to reach the right destination would have been disorientating for any new arrival and this became clear when, on her first day, one of the research team managed to get lost.

Rather than panic and make her way back down to reception, the researcher thought she would use the opportunity to experience what it may have been like for new employees to navigate the same terrain. Remembering that experiences of the 'strange' and the 'familiar' are actions which are known to provide researchers with opportunities to move away from positions of 'experience near' to positions of 'experience distant' (Geertz, 1973). In this case, the researcher used this moment to stop and talk to the people she bumped into about the building and its layout. Her behaviour, however, differed from that of other members of staff and unbeknownst to

her, the building manager and the on-site engineer, both of whom had been observing her, began to follow her. When the researcher finally reached the department she would be shadowing, they both approached her and tried to escort her from the premises for 'behaving suspiciously'. Fortunately for the researcher, a manager who had attended the introductory visit was present and was able to vouch for the researcher's presence. It was only as a result of the manager's intervention that the researcher was permitted to stay.

Knowing who has the power to open up or block off access is of course an important aspect of sociological knowledge about a setting (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This surprise encounter helped us realise that although we had been granted access by senior managers and the social workers, we had not formally sought permission from other members of staff who worked at the site, those who were perhaps unaware of the study and what our role would entail when we did arrive. In order to avert embarrassment and interference in social interaction, people are often required to possess certain attributes and engage in certain practices (see Goffman, 1959). Yet for researchers it takes time to learn the cultural rules, and in this instance, the act of getting lost and being seen to behave strangely,

had drawn attention to the researcher's position and in turn, framed her as an imposter and/or a security threat.

Van Maanen (2011) has called this part of field work a process of 'learning to move among strangers'. Although we had been very aware prior to entering the field, that all who worked at the site were strangers to us what we had not properly considered was how 'strange' we would appear to them. The importance of ethnographers being 'approachable' so that participants see them as non-threatening and safe is often discussed in the literature (Lofland et al, 2006; Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2016), however, in this context, it was because the researcher was trying to take on the role of being 'approachable' that she stood out as a risk or a threat to those who worked there. It was an encounter which shed light on the cultural practices of those whose job it was to maintain the building and protect those who occupied it:

> *Well that was highly embarrassing. If it hadn't been for [name of manager] I would have been escorted from the building in front of everyone. It didn't matter how friendly I was trying to be or what I said about the research project, the building manager wasn't having any of it. Even when my presence was accounted for, they continued to look suspicious of me whenever we bumped into each other*

(Extract from field notes).

We recognised as a team that we needed to understand the impact our presence had by thinking carefully about some of the things we wanted to do before we did them. Goffman (1989) suggested that there are certain rules about 'getting into place' that need to occur in order for access to be gained effectively. In this case, there were a number of (un)hidden gatekeepers present whom we had not previously accounted for and who, in line with Gil (2010), we recognised could help or hinder the study. It is not always obvious whose permission needs to be obtained or whose approval it might be advisable to secure (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Our response was to always be on alert, in case we upset people who might prevent our access or interrupt our attempt at subtle immersion into a culture we were keen to observe.

In doing so, we started to discreetly adapt to the environment by (un)intentionally mirroring the practices we observed taking place on a routine basis. At one site, this involved, for example, buying junk food for the teams we were sat with on a Friday because "Fat Fridays" was something the social workers felt they

deserved at the end of a hard week. Another technique used to get closer to the participants by one of the research team was 'vaping': an activity with many unexpected benefits as it promoted contact and encouraged connections with other practitioners who smoked or vaped. It was through vaping that a good relationship with the building manager (mentioned above) was established. Although initially suspicious of the research team, through vaping another member of the research team used the opportunity to reassure the building manager that we were not there to spy on the building, rather to observe social workers and their interactions with the families they worked with. This encounter opened up a new avenue of information that we were not previously privy to and the building manager became an integral part of the study. Due to the manager's length of employment with the organization, we were provided with a detailed historical overview of how the site had grown and morphed into the hot-desking site we were eager to study.

Negotiating access, blending in but trying to remain aware of our objectives became activities that we all had to engage with and as a result, took place in a number of different ways depending on the researcher's approach and position in the field. It was a topic that generated a lot of interesting discussions and dominated our

team meetings over the coming months as we tried to develop better strategies in accessing the social workers we wanted to shadow and the families we were keen to meet. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) remind us, gaining access is a particularly serious activity in ethnography and needs to be considered carefully since researchers may operate in settings where they have little power and participants may have a lack of incentive to cooperate when they have pressing concerns of their own to attend to.

The busy-ness of our participants was a factor that we were alert to, and were sharply reminded of, when one of the research team was warned during the early stages of the project that she needed to leave some social workers alone as they were "too busy" to talk to her. She also found that there were some people who did what they could to avoid contact with her altogether.

> *[Name of social worker] arrives in the office and I see her glance in my direction but she doesn't look at me, I know she's seen me but she doesn't acknowledge me…..The plan was to meet her outside of the fire exit in the bay area and I wonder if she's come inside in case I'm not here so she can make up an excuse not to meet with me.*
> *(Extract from field notes).*

Although teams at both research sites managed to successfully shadow the required sample of cases, the process of negotiating access was a never-ending 'balancing act' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 58). There were gains and losses in the approaches we used but judging what was the most appropriate strategy at the time given the purposes of the research helped us gather the data we required.

Access has been properly gained

Goffman (1989) said that people think they have properly gained access when they are told secrets and their jokes are found amusing but he argued that these were not true affirmative methods which provided assurance a researcher was truly 'in'. Instead, he felt that researchers had properly gained access when they picked up on the rhythm of the people and the place; when they moved in time with the way the culture worked. This was apparent to the researchers who had been at their respective sites for a few months when they were visited by two members of the research team who had not yet been to the sites. To the researchers 'in' the field of the larger site, the arrival of their colleagues to a place they now felt comfortable in seemed unnatural and slightly awkward. This was because they were clear

outsiders, unfamiliar with the cultural practices and not quite sure what they should do with themselves. To the researchers now familiar with their environment, they realised that the way the new arrivals presented themselves was how they must have looked when they first arrived: out of place and strange. The newcomers felt it also:

> *At the hotdesking site I felt very different. I felt quite nervous. First impressions of that site was, a very big bureaucratic building. Very institutional. It was slightly alarming and felt like a fortress. Swipe card. Lots of doors. Complicated access arrangements. I was worried I would make a mistake and end up somewhere I was not meant to be.*
> *(Extract from field notes)*.

Seeing the difference between where the research team once were, to where they were now, produced a moment of clarity for the two researchers who had been busy trying to blend into the 'very big bureaucratic building'. Being in the role of ethnographer meant that as researchers we were so busy trying to blend in, we hadn't even realised we had managed to actually blend in until we saw the way the newcomers from our team arrived and interacted with the site. But we soon learned that being part of the research culture was a position that presented us with dilemmas. Despite the sage advice offered by Goffman (1989) that being told

secrets is not a sign that access has been granted, on the occasions we were told secrets we did wonder if we had become too involved. This was especially pertinent when we became 'the holders of secrets' that we knew we had to protect but which, as a result, often left us feeling guilty.

For example, in one of the sites, one of the research team was informed that there were concerns about a particular social worker's practice. This was a social worker who had befriended our team member and who, in turn, provided amazing access. However, unbeknownst to the participant, an uncomfortable dynamic emerged as the researcher knew confidential information about the social worker that the social worker did not even know. The emotional struggle came when the researcher attempted to explore how the social worker was feeling whilst, at the same time, understand the concerns the manager had in relation to their practice. The situation was made worse by the fact that the social worker was having personal difficulties at home which they often talked to the researcher about:

> *I'm told that I'm part of the family now – yet I feel like a traitor in their presence... It's really uncomfortable being so embedded in this field site now – I know so many secrets and far more about people's personal lives than I really want to….In these ways the field site has become quite an exhausting*

place. The next 10 months ahead of me for fieldwork seems like an endless stretch of time…

This was an aspect of data collection that left the researcher feeling duplicitous as if they had a 'dirty secret' (see Morriss, 2015); an activity which Gable (2014) has described as feeling like a 'scholarly vulture'. Drawing on the theory of emotional labour by Hochschild (1983), Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) explore the emotive toll researchers encounter when they are in the field- aspects of gaining access and blending in that although are known to occur in qualitative research, are not always discussed in depth in empirical studies. However, Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2015) also recognised that as researchers try to establish rapport, so that they can successfully gain and maintain access, they may stumble across information they may struggle to digest. This is a process which requires a certain degree of introspection, especially when the researcher finds they are situated in contexts they would not normally seek out (Czarniawska, 2007; Van Maanen, 2011).

These blurring of boundaries occurred as we moved between insider/outsider distinctions. Outsiders and insiders have immediate access to different sorts of information and problems occur when the researcher fails to understand the

orientation of the participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). We recognised that these newly acquired positions required us to be reflexive and consider why our performances were not only unsettling but uncomfortable too. In doing so, we were able to assess our progress and impact on the field whilst remaining focused on our objectives

The researcher effect

Although we felt we had been accepted, we were aware that negotiating access, and the issues associated with it, would 'persist to one degree or another' throughout the data collection process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 41). Some may have referred to us as 'part of the family' and indeed, we did notice that there were social workers who appeared more comfortable with our presence than others. But of those who welcomed our presence we did not think for one moment that they ever forgot who we were or what our objectives were. As Gil (2010) demonstrated even when the research is invited the arrival of the researcher brings discomfort to workers who have to cope with the sudden lack of personal space. And when researchers enter

the backstage, the benefits that space previously brought participants disappears as there is nowhere for them to hide when the researcher is present:

> *Social workers are very aware of my Dictaphone – I came back in following leaving the room to find a social worker staring at it, and another explaining that 'this is what they record us with.' It was said in a joking way but there is a sense of unease I think amongst some members of staff about what I am recording and what I am witnessing. A manager was just chatting with two social workers and asked whether or not they had done a specific task on a case, the social worker couldn't recall doing it and laughing said 'If I did then couldn't have been a very good one!' Then looking across at me nervously said – 'Oh you haven't got your recorder on now have you?!'*
> *(Extract from field notes)*.

The trust we were awarded by those who let us in to record what we heard created feelings of anxiety for participants but also worry for us, as we felt we were viewed as having an ulterior motive. Bergman Blix and Wettergren (2014: 695) have argued that the 'lurking guilt' researchers often feel in relation to having a hidden agenda is a very real one because technically, if researchers do not know the actual outcomes of their project beforehand, in spite of their aims and objectives, then their agenda is never truly explicit. Researchers therefore do not actually know what they are going

to find and furthermore, the participants do not know how the data they produce will be interpreted.

In line with Goffman (1959) we found that impressions of the self were actively managed by participants during their social interactions. Communication took the form of the linguistic (verbal) and the non-linguistic (body language), gestures which were employed by social workers when in interaction with us and the families they were involved with. Of interest, Goffman found that in order to be seen as credible in any given performance, individuals who over-communicated gestures often tried to reinforce their desired self, whilst those who under-communicated gestures tried to detract from their desired self. This was apparent in the relations that developed between one of the research team and a social worker they were shadowing. Although the social worker had consented to take part in the research her body language and behaviour suggested that she felt reluctant and uncomfortable with being 'observed in practice'. This next extract documents their first visit to one of the families the social worker was working with:

> *[Name of social worker] then looks over at me and gives me a huge (fake, not meeting the eyes) smile asking if I'm ready. I walk to the car with the social*

worker and it's a bit frosty at first, it's awkward…..I ask questions about Christmas to break the ice. There are long silences. We sit in the car and the social worker spends a good 3 minutes putting things in the boot. I wonder if the social worker is nervous about this as they seem jittery and are breathing really heavily. When the social worker gets into the car….I ask if I can start recording and the social worker says "Yes, I do mind" then laughs and says "You've got to banter in this job, turn it on!". I laugh and the social worker starts driving, and when reversing the car runs over a curb.
(Extract from field notes).

Performers rely on expressive control to keep conflicting moods and energies from disrupting their performance (Goffman, 1959). In this instance, the exaggerated and ingenuine performance the researcher was presented with alerted them to the fact that all was not what it seemed. Yet the distinction between a true and false performance is not what really matters, rather what does is whether the performer is authorised to give the performance in question (see Goffman, 1959). Despite consenting to take part in the research, the consent provided by this participant was not, we believe, entirely voluntary. This was a social worker who had been asked to take part in the study by their manager as s/he was the most experienced member of the team and therefore, expected to be knowledgeable and worth following. The social worker was asked on many an occasion if s/he was certain they wanted to

take part in the study- the social worker always confirmed that s/he did. Yet we were aware that if s/he had refused to take part, the manager would have had reason to be concerned and so to avoid conjuring managerial concern the social worker used the boot of the car (the back stage) to compose and prepare for their front stage performance. Such instances may also reveal much of the participant's organisation and their place within it as Atkinson and Hammersley (2007: 63) note 'people in the field will seek to place or locate the ethnographer within the social landscape defined by their experience.' So, the researcher may appear an extension of hierarchical organisational structures and thus be feared, something as ethnographers we attempted to reassure our participants about by reaffirming anonymity throughout the project and our separate identities as academics.

As the project progressed, and we started to interview families about the relationships they had with their social workers, we learned that not only was our presence affecting the way in which some social workers were behaving with us, but also the way they were then behaving with their families:

RESEARCHER: So how often were you visited by [name of social worker]?

MOTHER: Very rarely, we haven't seen her for a long time. Last time I seen her was that meeting that we were in, the time before that was that month.

RESEARCHER: OK and how long does she stay when she does it?

MOTHER: Ten minutes, five or ten minutes.

RESEARCHER: So that day when I came, was that like a typical visit?

MOTHER: No. She was there a lot longer.

RESEARCHER: Was she?

MOTHER: Yes, a lot longer than usual and she don't always go upstairs to speak to [name of daughter] either.

RESEARCHER: OK so that was different because…?

MOTHER: Yes, yes because I was a bit gutted that she wanted to go upstairs because it was a right mess up there because they had been playing all day and I thought she never usually does that but as soon as she brings someone round she wants to go upstairs.

(Extract from interview)

Different local authorities have their own in-house procedures which are developed in accordance with the guidance issued by the Department for Education in the Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018) document. In general, however, the

government guidance suggests that when children are on a child protection plan, the allocated social worker is expected to see the child at home and alone (with the parent's agreement) at least every two weeks (Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2018). It also states that as part of their visit, social workers are expected to see the child's bedroom at least once between each child protection conference which is held every three months. When students are training to be a social worker, they are observed regularly in practice by their work-based supervisors but when they qualify they are rarely observed in action with families out in the field and so this aspect of practice remains hidden (see Pithouse, 1986). This extract sheds further light on why, perhaps, some social workers were nervous of being shadowed by the research team.

Goffman (1959) found that in order to prevent embarrassment and disruption in social interaction, participants are expected to have certain attributes and engage with certain practices. He categorised this activity as the ‘arts of impression management’ to show how people would perform defensively to maintain credibility. However, in order to convince the audience, the performer requires their team to exhibit dramaturgical loyalty if they are to protect their secrets from being uncovered.

As mentioned earlier, in this study there were in effect two sets of participants: families and social workers. The mother in this extract has been given an opportunity to have her views heard. The mother is not part of the social worker's team - she has therefore no moral obligation to protect the secrets of the social worker nor does she need to demonstrate any loyalty to the social worker to help her save face. Instead, the mother exposes aspects of her practice that were previously hidden to the outsider and in turn, reveals that she is not operating in line with the recommended guidance. A revelation that is strengthened by the mother's confession that she is so used to the social worker not seeing her child alone, she feels there is no reason for her to tidy the bedroom before she visits.

It is also possible that ulterior motives were at play, as we found that some of our social work participants used the research to 'offload' about their managers or issues they faced working for their organisation. In other situations, we recognised that taking part in the study provided participants with the space to categorise another group as problematic. We noted that this kind of activity often blurred the boundaries of our role as our research was seen as being a powerful mechanism that could lead

to a social worker getting fired, despite us never having explicitly given this impression to the family, as evidenced in a meeting in the office:

> *At the end of the meeting … [the social worker] jokes that she's a bit worried about the research. [The mother] turns to her and says "Yeah, your P45 is in the post!" It's an uncomfortable moment. I explain that isn't the point of the research. I thank [the mother] for allowing us to shadow and then say my goodbyes and leave.*
> *(Extract from field notes)*.

Conclusion

By using Goffman's theoretical perspectives on dramaturgy (1959) and getting into place (1989), we have illustrated how performativity plays an integral part in understanding complexities associated with the contingent process of negotiating access and the researcher effect. In doing so, we have highlighted how examining methodological findings is as important as the analysis of substantive data. Goffman (1989) felt that the researcher needed to appreciate that within any setting participants may (or may not) behave quite differently due to the context they were in, which is also co-constructed by the researcher(s). In this context, it is through

exploring the impact of our presence with two different groups of participants that certain behaviours and interactions, not normally visible to the ethnographic researcher, have been revealed.

Harrowell et al. (2018: 231) argue that openly sharing the stories that leave us feeling 'genuinely inadequate, unprofessional, or out of our depth' are important if we are to create a community of authenticity in qualitative research. Reflexivity is one tool in ethnography which can help researchers, who move from the position of an outsider to the position of an insider during the course of their project, to examine the impact of their presence. Indeed, Mayorga- Gallo and Hordge- Freeman (2016) recommend researchers ask themselves the question, 'Why and how did people talk to me?' so that power-laden particularities of field experiences can be unpacked for the benefit of both researchers and readers.

This crucial question has been especially pertinent for us to consider given that we had two sets of participants, who often had ulterior motives for being involved in the research. By explicitly making connections between ethnography and Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, we have been able to point out how as performers, actors (both researchers and their participants) can be concerned with

engineering impressions that successfully convince a particular audience that they possess the desired and required attributes to do the job well. Ethnographic research may be a more natural way for researchers to collect data but it is also a method which positions researchers in situations where they can easily influence encounters and, in effect, become part of the findings as well.

Funding

The research on which his paper is based was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant Number: ES/N012453/2).

References:

Bergman Blix, S., Wettergren, A. (2015) The emotional labour of gaining and maintaining
access to the field. Qualitative Research. Vol. 15(6) 688–704

Coffey A (1999) *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: Sage.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison K. (2000). *Research Methods in Education* (5th Edition).
London: Routledge Falmer.

Czarniawska, B. (1998). Who is Afraid of Incommensurability? *Organization*, *5*(2), 273–275.

Czarniawska B (2007) Shadowing and Other Techniques for Doing Fieldwork in Modern Societies. Malmö: Liber.

Department of Education (2018) Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779401/Working_Together_to_Safeguard-Children.pdf

Ferguson, H., Warwick, L., Singh Cooner, T., Leigh, J., Beddoe, L., Disney, T., Plumridge, G. (2020) The nature and culture of social work with children and families in long-term casework: Findings from a qualitative longitudinal study. *Child and Family Social Work*. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12746

Gable, E. (2014) The anthropology of guilt and rapport: Moral mutuality in ethnographic fieldwork. *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (1): 237–258

Geertz C (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Goffman E (1959) The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Doubleday.
Goffman, E. (1989). On Fieldwork. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *18*(2), 123–132.

Gil, G. J. (2010) Ethnography among 'experts': notes on collaboration and sabotage in the field. Qualitative Research. vol. 10(1) 49–69

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1995) Ethnography: Principles and Practice (2nd Edition). London: Routledge.

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (2007) Ethnography: Principles and Practice (3rd Edition). London: Routledge.
Hochschild AR (1983) The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling. Los Angeles:

University of California Press.

Harrowell, E., Davies, T. & Disney, T. (2018) Making Space for Failure in Geographic Research. *The Professional Geographer*. 70 (2). 230-238.

LeCompte, M. D., & Preissle, J. (1993). Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research (2nd ed.). New York: Academic Press.

Leigh, J. (2017) Recalcitrance, compliance and the presentation of self: Exploring the concept of organisational misbehaviour in an English local authority child protection service. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 79, 612-619.

Lincoln, Y. S; Egon, G. G. (1985) Naturalistic Inquiry. Sage: London.

Lofland J, Snow D, Anderson L and Lofland LH (2006) Analyzing social settings: A guide to
qualitative observation and analysis. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.

Manning, P. (2002). Erving Goffman and modern sociology. Stanford: Stanford University
Press.

Mayorga- Gallo, S., Hordge- Freeman, E. (2017) Between marginality and privilege: gaining access and navigating the field in multiethnic settings. Qualitative Research. Vol. 17(4) 377–
394

Morriss, L. (2016). Dirty secrets and being 'strange': using ethnomethodology to move beyond familiarity. *Qualitative Research*, *16*(5), 526–540.

Pinsky, D. (2013). The sustained snapshot: Incidental ethnographic encounters in qualitative interview studies. Qualitative Research. 15. 10.1177/1468794112473493.

Pithouse, A. (1987) *Social work: the social organisation of an invisible trade*. Aldershot: Avebury.

Pithouse, A. (1998) *Social work: the social organisation of an invisible trade*. Second Edition. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Plankey-Videla, N. (2012) Consent as Process: Problematizing Informed Consent in Organizational Ethnographies. *Qualitative Sociology,*35(1): 1-21.

Reeves, C. (2010) A difficult negotiation: fieldwork relations with gatekeepers. Qualitative Research. vol. 10(3) 315–331

Sampson, H. and Thomas, M. (2003) Lone researchers at sea: gender, risk and responsibility *Qualitative Research* 3 (2): 165-189

Shenton, A. & Hayter, S. (2004) Strategies for gaining access to organizations and informants in qualitative studies. Education for Information, 22, 223-231.

Taylor J (2011) The intimate insider: negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider
research. Qualitative Research 11(1): 3–22.

Van Maanen J (2011) Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.