American Journal of Qualitative Research
2022, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 168-188
https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/12573
© 2022 AJQR. http://www.ajqr.org

AMERICAN JOURNAL OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
ISSN: 2576-2141

Strategies for Gaining Access to Robbers: The Importance of Identity, Rapport, and Commitment Acts

Arthur G. Vasquez[1]
University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX, USA

Alejandro Rodriguez
University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, TX, USA

ABSTRACT
Researching hard-to-reach populations that are criminally active is difficult. Gaining access to these populations is essential to the success of the project, however, strategies to obtain access can involve navigating through complex and dangerous situations. Prior research has identified a range of factors that can influence the ability of researchers to gain access to offenders. Qualitative projects that encompass obtaining information from individuals mandate researchers to consider from whom they need to gain information, and how to appeal to the individuals. This relationship building is facilitated by strategies of gaining access that aid not only the recruitment of participants but also increase the quality of interactions and data collection. In this paper, we examine the importance of identity, rapport, and commitment acts in relationship building to gain access to active offenders in fieldwork. This contribution offers examples in which researchers can negotiate the difficulties in gaining access.

KEYWORDS: Qualitative, gaining access, identity, rapport, commitment acts.

The issue of gaining access to qualitative research has been discussed for some time now in various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and criminology (Brown et al., 1977; Clark, 2010; Crowley, 2007; Harrington, 2003; Tracy, 2013). However, what is less visible are the combined strategies of identity, rapport and commitment acts in gaining access. Negotiating, earning, and maintaining access is vital to the success of any qualitative research project (Reeves, 2010). In this study, these steps are important since this article required an in-depth data collection process through fieldwork with active offenders. Yet, most textbooks and empirical research rarely provide detailed accounts of the process and ongoing negotiation of gaining access. When access successes or challenges are recognized, it is often relegated to a short comment, appendices, or acknowledgment about a brief meeting with a gatekeeper (Michel, 2014).

Issues of gaining access are frequently a surprise to new qualitative researchers who have spent a vast amount of time developing the research design and are now eager to get into the field to obtain some answers. The issue of access can seem like a problem only vaguely associated with the actual research process. However, gaining access is an integral part of the process of doing qualitative fieldwork because not only must the researcher 'get in' to obtain the information, but

[1] Corresponding Author: A Visiting Assistant Professor in the Criminology and Criminal Justice Department at the University of Texas at Dallas, Texas, USA. E-Mail: vasquez@utdallas.edu

the process of 'getting in' can affect what information will be available to a researcher (Brown et al., 1977; Clark, 2010; Reeves, 2010; Scourfield, 2012).

Gaining access to participants and research sites has been challenging for researchers for many years (Corra & Willer, 2002; Reeves, 2010; Van Maanen, 1998). While there are method textbooks that provide a section on accessing the field (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Burgess, 1991; Creswell, 2007; Feldman et al., 2003; Glesne, 1999; Patton, 2002; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), there is no discussion on the actual difference between officially gaining permission to conduct the study and having individuals' support in gaining access in the field (Wanat, 2008). In textbooks, the terms 'cooperation' and 'access' are frequently used interchangeably to express two distinct processes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Glesne, 1999; Johnson, 1975; Van Maanen, 1998). Yet, when a researcher gains approval from a gatekeeper, it does not automatically guarantee full cooperation from potential participants (Corra & Willer, 2002; De Laine, 2000; Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991). The fact is that access, collaboration, and permission could be either denied or granted at each step of the process (Clark, 2010). This means that authorization and access will need to be gained as the researcher moves in and out of new areas and they meet new individuals (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

This paper assists qualitative researchers in identifying individuals who can help them gain access by demonstrating the importance of nurturing relationships through identity, rapport, and commitment acts. As part of the ongoing process of gaining access, researchers will deal with rejections and issues in developing rapport. This paper illustrates that being able to 'hang out' in a specific setting to observe or being permitted to interview respondents is only the first step in gaining access. Access involves being in a position not only to observe and learn from talking with individuals one time (Feldman et al., 2003). From this standpoint, access is not only something that is obtained once and done, but it is an ongoing process that can be created, developed, and enriched over time.

What is Access?

Access can be separated into two parts; primary and secondary access. Primary access can be defined as gaining permission to 'get in' with a group to undertake qualitative research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). In contrast, relationship building to gain access to the individual and specific information within the group is secondary access (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). At the fundamental level, access means having an opening to a group or organization where data collection can occur. At the most significant level, it pertains to getting consent to observe what you want, go where you want, and talk to whomever you want over long periods of time (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). This process can be very time-intensive, involving contacting and negotiating with numerous potential participants, all of whom may or may not even respond to the request (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). Even more challenging is the issue that while primary access could be granted, secondary access could be even more difficult or even blocked by various gatekeepers or informants (Feldman et al., 2003).

The form and type of access also vary depending on the nature of the research project and the kind of information needed (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). For example, secondary data required for quantitative analysis can easily be obtained without having to gain access to the organization directly; as compared to qualitative researchers who require primary data to study culture and in-depth social interaction (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). Qualitative fieldwork, as in this case, can introduce particularly challenging issues to gaining access since it requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the participant's daily lives for an extended period to observe interactions, listen to their feelings, and ask questions along the way (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Therefore, qualitative research is one of the main ways to gather

rich and detailed descriptions and interpretations about people's lives in a particular setting (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Patton, 2002). We argue that gaining access and maintaining access consists of recognizing its complex and relational nature, which mandates researchers to own responsibility for respecting the identity and values of their participants and understanding the possible consequences of their actions. This paper aims to examine gaining access strategies within a group of active robbers by observing their day-to-day interactions and routines as individuals and as a group. This paper will show how gaining and maintaining access to qualitative research can be influenced by factors such as identity, rapport, and commitment acts. The access stories within this paper come from the primary researcher's 28-month-long field experience.

Literature Review

Despite the significance of 'getting in,' prior literature and students of qualitative methods have not provided an expounded explanation of some issues in gaining access. While there are many qualitative research textbooks and articles that have sections on gaining access or issues related to access, there are only two books solely devoted to the topic of gaining access (e.g., Brown et al., 1977; Feldman et al., 2003). Most information on gaining access is often contained within the appendices in specific studies and not directly within the methods section (DiIuIio, 1987; Fenno, 1978). As a result, qualitative researchers are often not well-trained in strategies for gaining access (Okumus et al., 2007; Wax, 1971). Prior research often only offers a standard format for gaining access (e.g., through a gatekeeper); and hardly goes into detail on how identity and commitment acts help develop rapport in earning trust with the gatekeeper (Okumus et al., 2007). An even more significant challenge is often encountered by the lack of theoretical models in gaining access. This is because most of what has been published on gaining access has been offered ad hoc as a series of tips (Feldman et al., 2003). While tips for gaining admission are significant, they have been explicitly offered towards each situation (Okumus et al., 2007).

What motivates a relationship in the field context is possibly the same as what stimulates relationships in any other context. Individuals may want to help the researcher because they want to earn status through their connections, see an image of themselves of what they could have become, or because they sincerely like the researcher and therefore want to help them succeed (Blix & Wettergren, 2015). Possibly, the informants grant access because they hope to further expand the knowledge of their group in a way that only their group can provide. While the specific reasons for giving access are essential in any qualitative study, in this paper, we will focus more on viewing access through the lens of developing relationships. In considering gaining access through a relationship lens, it is possible to connect the access process to something we all encounter regularly. While the nuances of relationships are often mysterious, many of us still participate in developing, gaining, and maintaining relationships. Using the relationship lens not only associates access to something we are all familiar with, but it also draws attention to crucial strategies of the gaining access process that help individuals make decisions on the following actions to take.

Prior research on gaining access has often been associated with the process of opening a door (Brown et al., 1977), and this provides an image that an entry exists for every group. Moreover, since it is referenced as simple as a door, it implies that the researcher can easily find and easily access it with the correct key. The image of a door is further supported by the term often used for access, 'entry' (Feldman et al., 2003). When access is used in this way, it places a significant amount of the researcher's actions on developing skills, planning, and the selection of the site. While these actions are critical for gaining access; however, they are not enough to fully understand the process. The example of using a door for gaining access fails to recognize that there are individuals on the other side of the door either allowing or not allowing access. These doors of

opportunities do not just open on their own, but must be opened by willing individuals. Additionally, entering an open door is only the beginning of many more steps to gain access (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Creswell, 2007; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Maxwell, 1996). Essentially, gaining access will continue throughout the research project, and there is no moment when the researcher can relax without worrying about losing access (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Clark, 2010; Czarniawska, 1998; Sixsmith et al., 2003).

To initially gain access, the researcher needs to attract sufficient attention to an individual on the inside, so they will be interested enough to see who is fascinated by them. It also mandates that the researcher be able to persuade the individual or the group just enough so that the researcher can explain why they want to access it. Then the researcher needs to not only be invited in but allowed to stay for a while so they can collect information. The relationship must also be developed enough so the researcher can come and go as they please throughout the process (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Clark, 2010; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Therefore, gaining access to research sites and individuals can uniquely differ for each research project. This is because respondents and gatekeepers may interpret what they are being asked to do within their own social context (Feldman et al., 2003; Johnson, 1975; Shaffir et al., 1980; Wax, 1971). Therefore, it is vital for researchers to learn the social structure of their research environment to negotiate access successfully (Berg, 2004; Feldman et al., 2003; Shaffir et al., 1980) This is because negotiating access into a group is unpredictable, ill-defined, and can be an overall uncontrollable process while attempting to build relationships with gatekeepers (Burgess, 1991; Feldman et al., 2003; Reeves, 2010). This is why some researchers try to negotiate access with multiple gatekeepers at various potential entry points (Feldman et al., 2003; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Johnson, 1975; Patton, 2002; Shaffir et al., 1980). Formal gatekeepers, who are considered to be in a position of power, have the authority to permit access to a specific entry for the researcher to conduct their research (Berg, 2004; Glesne, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Johnson, 1975; Shaffir et al., 1980). The informal gatekeepers within the group often attempt to protect any vulnerable group members and the research settings (Berg, 2004; Feldman et al., 2003; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014).

While it is vital to identify the individual in the group who has the power to grant access, receiving approval from the highest level can be risky (Dempsey, et al., 2016; Feldman et al., 2003; Glesne, 1999). This is because the individual at the highest level may refuse access to the group when lower levels of the group have already been granted access. In some cases, the higher-level gatekeeper might lead the researcher away from sensitive areas and only allow the researcher to see what they want to be exposed (Clark, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). However, when there are potentially multiple entry points for access, the researcher may need to gain approval from each level of gatekeepers. What could be confusing in the process is knowing what level to begin with, due to the multiple hierarchy levels (Feldman et al., 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). As a result, researchers need to think about gaining access as a relentless pull and push between the researcher and the gatekeeper (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Van Maanen, 1998).

The lead author is a Latino American male who is currently a visiting assistant professor in a criminology department. He was a Ph.D. student and fellowship award recipient at the time of writing and data collection for this project. The second author is also a Latino American male, who at the time of the study is an associate professor in public administration and public policy. The goal of the study was to add to the existing literature on the process of gaining access to hard-to-reach populations by using the author's similar identities, rapport development, and commitment acts. Data were collected by the first author, who was raised within the same neighborhood as the sample population. Due to the similarities between the first author's and the participants' backgrounds, we had a discussion on how this influenced access, data collection, and our

interpretations of the data. The interest in this topic stemmed from seeing first-hand the drastic difference between what was taught in courses as compared to what was personally experienced in gaining access to the field with active offenders. When the topic of gaining access is discussed in literature it is often portrayed as a simple process such as "access typically begins with a 'gatekeeper,' an individual who is a member of or has insider status with a cultural group" (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). It is often followed up by another statement informing the student to 'approach' the gatekeeper and culture slowly (Creswell, 2007). For a new researcher, what does this exactly mean? More importantly, is the approach the same for every sample population? Lastly, does the approach and acquisition of a gatekeeper only occur once? This is why it was decided to invest time to write this article to help other new researchers gain a better understanding of the challenges and nuances of gaining access to hard-to-reach populations. The intention of the article is to inform future researchers of the challenges in not only gaining access with a gatekeeper but also to let them know that the process of gaining and maintaining access could occur several times in the project. This typically happens as they work through the different layers of gatekeepers, key informants, and internal sponsors. Additionally, the article intends to illustrate the significance of how identity and commitment acts can help build rapport in order to gain access to hard-to-reach populations.

Methodology

Qualitative research provided an opportunity to explore twelve active offenders who, at the time of this study, were participating in robbery. The research occurred in a large metropolitan area in Texas from August 2015 to December 2017 (28 months). Initially, a total of 15 offenders were targeted, but after data saturation was achieved within the initial twelve respondents, it was agreed to stop the collection process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Saturation of the data was obtained when the primary researcher acknowledged there were no new emerging themes in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guest et al., 2006). Dependent upon the sample size of the selected population, research has shown that data saturation can be obtained with as few as six participants (Guest et al., 2006) as well as with the 'rich depth' of the quality of the data (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012; Fusch & Ness, 2015). Participants in this study ranged from 16 to 26 years old. They were all male and consisted of three African Americans, three Caucasians, and six Latinos. The sample was purposeful and is not generalizable to the general population of offenders participating in robbery.

Qualitative methods were selected since they allowed the researcher to study phenomena in the participants' natural settings in hopes of learning and to understand their lives through observation and immersion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Huot, 2014; Spradley, 1980). The process of fieldwork and immersion provided the primary researcher with the ability to discover, identify, and describe the offenders' complex world and be able to interpret the phenomenon meaning within this study. Exploring offenders who are actively robbing victims can enrich understanding of their processes, activities, and motivations by observing the participants and the setting. The qualitative methodology allowed the primary researcher to observe and interact with the respondents daily to openly discuss each of their personal experiences to grasp an understanding of their involvement in the robbery as participants in their setting (Berk & Adams, 1970; Decker & van Winkle, 1996; Hochstetler, 2001).

Qualitative methods utilized within this study were broad and diverse and ranged from observation to immersion, and were accompanied by semi-structured interviews for a comprehensive analysis. To complete this study, participant observation required immersion in the environment of the investigation to holistically understand the participant's behaviors, values, and language (McNaughton et al., 2014). This continuous process of participant access and engagement

within their natural setting added to the strength of the rapport and relationship and was central to the study (Brink & Edgecombe, 2003).

Sampling

The primary researcher employed a snowball technique to identify, recruit, and select a particular pool of active offenders (Chambliss, 1975; Polsky, 1967; Watters & Biernacki, 1989). The gatekeeper was identified by the primary author, who was at the time a gang interventionist and had known him for five years. The gatekeeper was an individual who was active in robbery and had strong connections and reputation throughout criminal networks and who participated in different types of crime (Vasquez et al., 2020). The primary researcher asked the gatekeeper, Tito, to be introduced to people who were engaged in robberies. Due to Tito's strong reputation in the streets, it was easy for him to clarify the study objectives and to validate the researcher as a non-threatening individual to the participant's social and legal status (Biernancki & Waldorf, 1981; DeShay et al., 2020, Irwin, 1972; Vasquez et al., 2020; Vasquez & Vieraitis, 2016).

Next, criterion sampling was used to collect data from the identified offenders (Patton, 2002). The first criterion was centered on the type of criminal activity the individual participated in; in this case, it was a robbery. The next criterion concentrated on the geographic location where the criminal activity occurred, and in this study, was a large metropolitan area in Texas. The final criterion focused on whether or not the individual was considered to be an 'active offender' in a robbery. Previous research has defined the term 'active offender' as people who have participated in two more criminal acts within the two prior months and, more importantly, who were not presently incarcerated (DeShay et al., 2020; Vasquez et al., 2020; Vasquez & Vieraitis, 2016; Wright et al., 1992). All participants met the criterion.

Setting

The selected area was ripe for recruitment since the large metropolitan area had been experiencing an increase in robbery. The environment in which the participants resided was recognized as being overwhelmed with gangs and drugs and has a high teen pregnancy rate of 11 per 1,000 females (Children's Health, 2019). The area's school district annually reports an average of 112 gangs within their schools (M. Dovick, personal communication, 2013). During the research project, all juveniles regularly attended a public-school system. All adults were employed either part-time or full-time. The participants in the study came from various family units, including single-parent; multi-family; and two-parent households. Two participants were considered upper-middle-class and upper-class. In contrast, a large portion of the participants came from a low socioeconomic background as indicated by the poverty guidelines (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). The general geographic area where the participants lived was labeled as "high poverty" since 24.9% of people 18 years or younger lived-in poverty and had an overall poverty rate of 18.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

Selecting the Group

One of the more critical processes in a qualitative study is selecting the group to study and the chosen group should be one the researcher is not familiar with. As mentioned previously, a qualitative study aims to gain the informants' perspective of their culture; how they do things; and how they experience their environment. Two issues are critical in selecting a group, finding: (1) a group that will permit access and (2) a group that will permit the researcher to get the needed data.

It is helpful to know whether you will have access to the group before launching into the full research. It is also vital to know what type of access will be permitted. In this scenario, it was essential to informally 'hang out' with a few members of the group before fully beginning the official research project because if the researcher cannot gain access, then there is no project. In this study, the primary researcher attended a social gathering at the gatekeepers' house with a few possible informants to get a sense of what kind of people could be in the study; what type of challenges could be encountered; and the level of trust that would need to be developed. It also aided in narrowing down the kind of research questions that might be answered by using this specific group. Moreover, it helped the primary researcher in understanding the social dynamics within the group in deciding whom to talk to and whom to observe within the group.

Gatekeepers and Key Informants

One of the first steps in entering a new environment is learning some of the group's language and nuances. To help prepare for entry into the research area, researchers often need to be aware of and learn the setting's terminology to easily relate to the gatekeepers and informants (Spradley 1979). Learning the language and vocabulary greatly increases the chance of gaining access (Clark, 2010; Feldman et al., 2003). Understanding what people mean when a word or a particular phrase is used in a specific context is vital in not only understanding what the informants are saying, but also enhancing the relationship development between the informant and researcher (Clark, 2010; Feldman et al., 2003). As a result, it increases the overall quality of information they are comfortable in sharing (Feldman et al., 2003; Reeves, 2010).

Gaining access to a group of active offenders requires a minimum of two 'roles,' which could or could not be identified in the same individual. To start, there was a need for someone who could actually grant the primary researcher access to the group of active offenders (e.g., the gatekeeper, Tito). In this study of robbers, the primary researcher had already known of an informant previously used in a prior study and whom he had known for five years. Gaining access would not have been possible without the 'buy-in' from the gatekeeper, Tito. While the gatekeeper allowed the researcher access to his network of friends, it was costly and dangerous to him and the primary researcher. During the initial introductions, it became apparent that some of his peers were wondering if the primary researcher was working with law enforcement as a narc (i.e., undercover law enforcement). The benefit of this type of long-term study in the field is that the gatekeeper, Tito, was able to convince his criminal network that the primary researcher was granted access by typically saying, "He's no narc, he is just a chill homeboy that wants to tell our story." Additionally, since it was a long-term study, the primary researcher was able to dissuade them of their belief over time by getting to know them or by showing commitment to the group over time.

The second required role is a key informant. While the gatekeeper makes the access available, it is often the key informant's (or informants') role to be the 'tour guide.' This person is the one with whom you can ask all of numerous questions throughout the study. Then there are the non-key informants, who are simply observed through fieldwork and potentially interviewed later. The role of the key informant is to help the researcher understand mannerisms and personalities; decipher the language; as well as to comprehend socially acceptable and unacceptable nuances. For this study, the key informant needed to be someone who is an expert within the culture of robbers. It is also crucial that the key informant be actively involved within the group. This is because former members may not be fully aware of what the group is currently experiencing. More importantly, depending on how the individual left the group, they could be biased toward individual members. For this reason, anyone who had not participated in a robbery in over two months was excluded from the study since they would not be considered 'active' by their peers.

A key informant ought to be comfortable enough with the researcher to be willing and able to talk with you in their 'native' speech. This means that the key informant is allowed to speak freely while the researcher made an effort not to ask him to alter his style of communication. When a key informant has to continuously stop to explain what was going on, then there is a risk of altering the environment, behavior, and communication style while the researcher is present. For example, in the beginning, the key informant 'Alex' often interrupted general conversations within the group, in order to translate the slang street talk into what he considered to be 'school smart.' On one occasion, when David said, "my nig gos dat sweet azz lick da o'day;" Alex leaned over to the primary researcher to explain what David had said: "Yo, what David was saying is that he just did a robbery a couple days ago." Although the key informant meant well, the primary researcher had to remind Alex that he did not need to interpret every aspect of the language. The primary researcher informed Alex that he would pick it up as we went on, and if the researcher needed something explained, he would ask at that time. This is important because you want the informant and others around him to feel comfortable enough to not worry about what they say or do around the researcher. The goal was to blend in and learn from their experiences. So, when Alex needed to explain something to the researcher, Alex would be willing since he would not have been tired from constantly explaining verbiage and situations. Another characteristic of the key informant is their ability and willingness to take the necessary time to answer the questions throughout the lengthy research project. The key informant is vital in gaining a better understanding of the environment as well as to help continuously make additional introductions. Therefore, developing the key informant will involve plenty of work in order to build trust, and even more, work to maintain this relationship. If the relationship is not maintained it could hinder the research project. More importantly, if the key informant relationship is not maintained, it is enormously difficult to 'start over' with another individual once you are far along in the project.

During the beginning of the access process, the researcher must have an informant within the group who can vouch for the researcher's presence. In the beginning of this study the primary researcher had to frequently negotiate with many potential participants who hung out at the 'yard;' a neighborhood area filled with abandoned buildings. Even though the primary researcher had begun building trust with Alex, the primary researcher had been warned that he would need to be concerned with others in the group who were suspicious of the researcher's presence and motives. Alex told the researcher, "Ah, I told the fellas that yous bees cool and shit, but you know how some fuckers are, they be trippin and think you're a cop. I told em that you jus a student trying to tell their story and shit." It would take weeks of fieldwork to be able to have someone accept the 'vouch' of his identity. A month later, Beto saw me in the yard hanging out with Tito and Alex, and he pulled me aside and said:

> *Yous say that you just wanna tell our story huh, you seem cool. If they trust you, then you must know the right people. You already know what we do, and ain't nobody got arrested, but if I find out you a cop, then I'll fuckin kill you and your family for snitchin us out bitch.*

While I got 'vouched in' by the gatekeeper and the informant, it was Beto, the muscle in the group, that the rest of the group respected. Once Beto laid down the ground rules by threatening the primary researcher, it opened another door to the group since now the rest of the group was more accepting of my presence. Having someone who can vouch for you to meet more participants and possibly protect you during the process of collecting data, can be very important. This experience illustrates that there are many doors that need to be accessed to gain trust. Having multiple respondents who can vouch for the researcher in the field can assist the researcher in

developing and building webs of relationships. Therefore, being vouched in early with certain key individuals can help a researcher and provide both vertical and lateral connections to others within the group's network.

Results

Identity

In the early stages of research development, many researchers often do not have a complete sense of how their identity will affect the research project (Feldman et al., 2003; Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). More often than not, researchers are mainly concerned with being taken seriously and appearing competent. An important part of getting ready to make initial contact is being confident enough to articulate why the selected individuals are interesting and what the researcher hopes to learn from them. A researcher's identity is important to the issue of rapport building, especially in this case with active offenders. While it was predicted that particular aspects of the primary researcher's identity, specifically his gender; ethnicity; and class status; might either complicate or make rapport development easier, it had not been anticipated the number of aspects that were important during relationship building. In addition to gender, ethnicity, and class status, the primary researcher stated that respondents talked about other significant similar identity aspects such as; religion, educational background, and prior criminal occurrences.

Attempting to be objective and non-biased is a goal that the primary researcher attempted to maintain. However, the primary researcher was aware that he was a Latino male, born and raised in the same neighborhood, from a low-socioeconomic class, and had associated with similar offenders, such as the respondents during his teenage years. The primary researcher had been through similar experiences and the socialization process of the respondents. Therefore, my awareness of my identity as a researcher was also critical. Since the primary researcher and a large portion of the participants shared several aspects of their identity, it made the process of gaining access easier, as compared to if there were no identity commonalities. More importantly, since the primary researcher shared multiple identity aspects and prior experiences, it allowed the respondents to classify him as an insider throughout the study. The primary researcher often resembled the respondents being observed and was often misidentified as being an intimate part of the group. On one occasion, while walking from Michael's house to Juan's apartment, we were stopped by local law enforcement. The police officers were very rude and pushed us both onto the hot hood of the police car. Next, while one illegally searched our closed bags and cell phones, the other officer asked us questions about something we had no knowledge of about, some random auto theft that they said occurred around the block. We both remained calm, didn't talk back, and eventually, the police drove away. Michael looked at me and said, "They always fuckin with us Mexicans for just walkin." I responded, "It hasn't changed. I remember because I grew up down the street." Since the primary researcher had experienced much of what they were now experiencing, they could see that he was accustomed to this type of experience, it helped him gain access quicker since it helped the respondents drop their guard and be more open with him, seeing that they had some similar identity experiences.

Part of the challenge with identity in the access process is that it could take time to distinguish where the researcher's identity fits as an observer of the group. The primary researcher was convinced that his ability to gain the trust of the group members quickly was partially based on his general acceptance of their criminal lifestyle and personalities. In his case, he was a minority male who had come from very similar backgrounds and, more specifically grew up in and around individuals who also lived the criminal lifestyle. Therefore, the primary researcher was familiar

with their verbiage, mannerisms, public display of aggressive behavior, and being accustomed to having drugs and guns present. For example, one day while at the 'yard,' Tommy offered the primary researcher marijuana by saying: "You wanna hit this?" The offer was declined by indicating that the researcher had started looking for a job and might get drug tested. Tommy said, "That's wuz up, gotta get dat green." We then walked back to his car, where he then asked, "Den I guess you ain't looking to buy a strap den?" A 'strap' is a gun. In being a curious researcher and familiar with these situations, I responded "Naw, I'm good, but what are you selling and how much?" Tommy walked to his trunk, looked around, and said:

> *Right now, I gots dis 9mm is five bills ($500) cos it's a glock. Dis 38 special for 4 bills ($400). I gots two crowd pleasers (shotguns). Both 'em are pistol grip Mossberg's for like 3 bills ($300). Den I gots dis AR-15 for a little less than a G ($1,000). I also gots some sixty and hundred round clips for ARs and AK-47s for a hundred each.*

Since the primary researcher was familiar with being around this lifestyle, he entered into a casual conversation with Tommy by saying, "Shit Tommy, you are rolling around dirty; remind me not to ride with you, I don't want to catch a case." Tommy and the researcher laughed it off, and Tommy closed the trunk while both of them enjoyed a cold beer leaning on the vehicle with all of the weapons inside. Since the primary researcher was comfortable being around this lifestyle, he did not judge or react negatively towards the participant or situation, which Tommy picked up on. The researcher just went with the flow of the conversation to show Tommy that he was not there to judge him and, more importantly, to show Tommy that he was not afraid of being in certain situations.

On another occasion, Larry invited the primary researcher inside his apartment after a long day of running around doing random errands. When we arrived at Larry's place, there were empty alcohol bottles everywhere; leftover food and trash from fast-food establishments on the floor; a couple of dirty broken chairs; and a strong smell of marijuana. On the makeshift dining table were dominoes, filled ashtrays; more empty beer bottles; and marijuana accompanied with paraphernalia. The whole apartment had cockroaches running around everywhere. While we sat there drinking water, talking about random subjects, Larry asked, "Yo, you ho-gry? I'm gots sum ray-man." Seeing that the primary researcher had once lived this type of lifestyle, he was not uncomfortable at all and responded, "Yeah, I can eat." This act of commitment of eating dinner with the respondent and accepting the respondent's identity and lifestyle drastically opened the door to Larry. When the researcher did not judge the respondent's home life, it showed Larry that the researcher would accept him for who he was and was willing to break bread with him while we argued about what the Dallas Cowboys should do this week. After this night, the respondent seemed to feel more at ease with the researcher and was more open to discussing details of his life and criminal lifestyle.

From the experiences expressed above, it was discovered that identity mattered in ways the primary researcher had not expected. This could be because, as students of qualitative research, we are taught and believe that when researchers are engaged in conducting qualitative research, the 'researcher' is the primary identity that should be viewed by respondents as the primary identity. However, when conducting fieldwork, the researcher leaves their established identity and image behind and moves toward another space, where the interaction with individuals could construct us in different ways (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Feldman et al., 2003). Identity and positionality can significantly influence the researcher-participant relationship, e.g., whether the researcher is the same or different from the respondents in terms of ethnicity, gender, culture, and socioeconomic

status. This can affect how the respondents view the researcher as generating knowledge or as a distant professional stranger (Agar, 1980/1996; Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). The positioning influences how the researcher is trusted and perceived by the group members and their willingness to share thoughts, experiences, and knowledge. As a result, the researcher needs to be responsive and sensitive to the constant shifting and different expectations encountered.

Everyone does not have only one identity but rather several identities, including gender; race; class; nationality; professional status; and religion; to name a few. Therefore, it is important to note that the intersection of identities could have a substantial effect beyond each identity (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991). In acknowledging their various identities, the researcher and respondents get to know each other better while learning to feel more comfortable in each other's presence. As a result of accepting and broadening the range of possible identities to explore, the primary researcher could obtain information that might otherwise not have been available (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013; Kleinman, 1980).

Rapport

Developing rapport with individuals who can offer information is an essential step in gaining access. While a researcher can have formal access to the group by the gatekeeper, they often cannot get the required information because they have not yet developed a rapport with the respondents (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Clark, 2010). This is because while a researcher can be granted access to the group, they can also not have access to the information (Czarniawska, 1998; Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). The foundation for gaining access depends upon trust between individuals and the researcher (Clark, 2010). More often than not, all one has to do simply is spend time with individuals to get to know them (Stoller, 1989). More often than not, for others to know and trust you; all you have to do is spend time with the group (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Clark, 2010; Stoller, 1989). This is important from a relational perspective since an individual is more likely to open up and disclose information with someone they trust (Blix & Wettergren, 2015).

Initially, the researcher was randomly introduced to the gatekeeper's peers at various social gatherings. At the time when he was introduced, he tried to minimize his presence to reduce his effect on them or the environment. While the researcher attempted to become the proverbial 'fly on the wall,' it was difficult for the group not to notice a stranger at one of their private social gatherings of active offenders. As a result, attempts were made to make small talk about topics that males generally talk about, including sports, alcohol, and women. The hope in this process was to develop trust and familiarity with potential participants over time. However, it was discovered that although some individuals in the group were willing to talk with the primary researcher socially, some were not because they were suspicious of the role of the researcher and the relationship with the gatekeeper. When the primary researcher attempted to make small talk with potential respondents, they would often say, "Whos you be? I don't know you. You may chill with my homeboy, but I don't trust you." Finding active offenders who would provide their experiences and stories was even more difficult. For example, when the primary researcher knew that Charles was participating in setting up victims to rob them, the primary researcher planned to develop a rapport over time before asking for an official interview. However, from the initial meetings, it was quickly apparent that the group members would not be willing to openly discuss felony criminal activity in front of the researcher.

For example, on numerous occasions, a group of robbers denied access to specific conversations that were considered 'sensitive information. These sensitive topics mainly pertained to their criminal activities that they did not want the primary researcher to know. More specifically, the members evaded any questions about robberies in the beginning. It was only over time, and

after being accepted by another layer of gatekeepers, that the primary researcher could openly talk with potential respondents willing to give in-depth critical information about their criminal activity. A strategy for dealing with suspicion from potential respondents was to identify 'internal sponsors' within the group. These 'internal sponsors' were another layer more profound than the gatekeeper and consisted of a vital member of the robber crews who could be willing to help champion and facilitate the researcher amongst the crew and could even assist in the data collection (Louvrier, 2018; MacLean et al., 2006). In this case, the internal sponsor was Charles. He was an older member of the group. He presented himself as having high self-esteem and was well-respected by other group members for being willing to get into a physical altercation to protect his friends. At first, Charles was hesitant to talk openly with the primary researcher. However, once it was discovered through small talk that we both attended the same high school in the area and were in the same automotive cluster (at different times, of course), it lowered his protective wall. As a result, we both began talking about our individual high school experiences, and from that point on, our relationship grew. From that point on, Charles became an internal sponsor and began to make introductions for the primary researcher.

An integral component in developing a relationship is rapport. Rapport is based on the amicable relationship between the informant and the researcher. When a basic sense of trust is developed, it will allow for information to flow freely (Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Spradley, 1979). The researcher can be viewed as a trustworthy individual by their actions of attentive listening, civility, and having an authentic concern for the informant. Expression of these actions and behaviors is essential in any type of qualitative research. Still, the primary researcher in studying active robbers illustrated how significant it was for him in the field context to pay special attention to the expression of the qualities mentioned above. The researcher believed this facilitated rapport and trust among active offenders and their associates.

In this study, relationship building was particularly important since the researcher engaged with the informants constantly to develop a long-term relationship. When a researcher only has one contact with individuals in the study, it is very difficult to develop trust in order to get the in-depth information needed to tell the holistic story. In some situations, participants may open up due to their need to express their feelings. However, individuals are less likely to share information freely if they perceive their stories will result in negative consequences. In general, it was discovered that group members were more willing to talk to the researcher and eventually complete a recorded interview only after rapport was developed. None of the respondents would have agreed if the researcher had shown up one day and asked for a recorded interview about their everyday criminal activities. However, once the participants understood the project and developed a relationship with the researcher, they were more comfortable openly discussing the details of their criminal experiences.

Commitment Acts

Gaining access involves becoming accepted by the whole group. While access could be facilitated by the gatekeeper or by the key informant, gaining full access could also involve 'commitment acts.' A researcher attempting to establish trust from a relational perspective could involve the researcher demonstrating their commitment to the respondents through 'commitment acts.' These acts humanize the researcher because their acts are viewed as building trust while not expecting any gain in return (Daniel-Echols, 2003; Feldman et al., 2003). Commitment acts are any activity the researcher performs to be trusted by the individual and, thereby the group as a whole. An example of a commitment act is when Lumsden (2009) drove the gatekeeper to a specialty car show after the gatekeeper's license was revoked. In this study, the primary

researcher's commitment initially consisted of maintaining a presence at the normal hang-out spot, which assisted in establishing the seriousness of his intent. While it may not seem to be a huge gesture, it is important to note that when the participants socially gathered, it was usually outside for long periods at a time. During this time, it was typically over 100 degrees outside.

There were numerous acts that the primary researcher committed to validating his sincere presence within the group. For example, on one occasion, the primary researcher drove Alex, the key informant, to his peer's (and potential respondent) Josh's apartment so Alex could get a haircut from Josh. When we arrived, one of the first noticeable things was the apartment complex's dilapidated appearance. It was filled with trash, and broken alcohol bottles, and had scores of gang members standing out front and in the courtyard. As we walked through the courtyard, you could feel the uneasiness from the gang members as we got closer, seeing that they all stopped talking and stared at the stranger, the researcher. The primary researcher was the outsider that was walking through their courtyard, but as he followed the key informant, Alex let the gang members know that the researcher was with him, thereby temporarily vouching for the researcher's presence. As we walked into Josh's apartment, it was quickly apparent that individuals inside the apartment were heavily smoking marijuana. Alex introduced me to the group saying: "This is that guy; he is the one that I told yall about. He's a cool-ass motherfucker. He's that researcher that is going to write a bomb-ass story about our lives and make us famous." The group reacted very hesitantly and just responded with a simple nod of their head and said: "Whatz guud." When individuals from this population ask: "Whatz guud", they are typically saying, 'What is going on,' 'What are you doing?' or 'What's up?' Initially, there was an attempt to make small talk, but it was very awkward during the initial meeting. Once Alex was done with his haircut, Josh looked at the researcher and said: "What's up, you down to get cut too?" It was quickly decided to show Alex, Josh, and the others of my commitment by letting Josh (a stranger to the researcher) cut my hair. Truth be told, Josh did a pretty good job cutting the researcher's hair, even though it was shorter than usual. This commitment act involved energy and trust on the researcher's part to take a chance to move past the uncomfortable feeling of getting a bad haircut, in hope of building rapport. In the end, it worked out and Josh cut the researcher's hair several more times over the next two years. In proving to Josh and the others in the room that the researcher trusted Josh to cut his hair, showed his commitment and helped him gain access to the group. This, in turn, helped open up regular discussions with Josh and the group's participation in the robbery.

On another occasion, Alex, the key informant, invited the primary researcher to a social event at one of his peer's house. On our way, Alex said, "There is going to be a lot of shit going on and a lot of nigguahs, so just chill and don't ask questions, just go with the flow." When we arrived, there were individuals whom the researcher recognized from previous random introductions and there were a few that the researcher had never met before. As the researcher worked his way through the house and into the backyard, where the majority of the crowd was gathered, the researcher could easily see bags of marijuana, cocaine, prescription pills, and several guns on the dining room table. In the backyard, several group members were hanging out, listening to music, and talking while waiting for the food to be cooked on the grill. Within a few minutes, the researcher could see that David, who was on the grill, was having a hard time getting the grill started. Since the researcher was not aware that it would be a cookout and did not bring anything, the researcher offered to help get the grill going. As it turned out, the researcher worked the grill all night until everything was cooked. While the researcher was cooking on the grill, local law enforcement showed up to ask the owner of the house to turn the music down. As the two officers walked into the backyard from the side gate (not going through the house to see all the drugs and weapons inside), they started demanding everyone get against the fence line so they could pat everyone down. When the researcher turned around, he could see someone inside moving

everything that was illegal out of public view and hidden away. When the officers started to yell at us and asked us if there were any weapons or drugs, the researcher followed the lead of the other members and mouthed off to the police by claiming that he had no knowledge of drugs or guns on site. The researcher responded:

> *No, there aren't any weapons here. The only drugs here are my fajitas on the grill. These guys can't get enough of them. But, sir, we are just chilling, cooking out, and drinking some beer after a long week. Did someone call in a noise complaint? Oh, and do you want a taco? We got enough to share.*

The officer turned toward the researcher, patted him down, looked at the food he cooked, and said: "Just keep the noise down. We don't want to have to come back." This commitment act helped foster rapport between the group and the researcher. This was a turning point in the relationship building with the individuals the researcher would depend on for information. After law enforcement left, the group had let their guard down and seemed at ease. Not only was the primary researcher no longer invisible, but he was suddenly the center of attention, the object of great interest, and especially amusement. In this culture, to be teased is to be accepted, so it was well received. It was the turning point for the relationship between the group, and it meant that the primary researcher was quite literally "in."

Thus, the commitment act had two benefits: (1) it showed the group the researcher was serious about getting to know each person, and (2) it eventually provided the researcher with unique insights into the psychology of their criminal lifestyle. The idea of commitment acts brings to the forefront a challenge that was not planned but had to be dealt with in the field quickly. Commitment acts are frequently discussed in the plural because they are often ongoing. As a result, at some point, the researcher needs to decide how far they are prepared to go in order to fully gain access to the group. Commitment acts do not need to be dramatic to be effective. They also do not have to be illegal or dangerous since simple mundane acts can effectively demonstrate the willingness to listen and connect and the worthiness to be trusted (Feldman et al., 2003).

While the acts that were engaged in were not pre-planned or deliberately done to build rapport, these activities demonstrated to the group a level of engagement that gained the primary researcher trust and respect of the individuals with whom he was building the relationships. When the primary researcher did a commitment act, he was not sure there would be an explicit gain. The fact that the primary researcher did not expect to gain anything by participating in commitment acts, illustrated the difference between the traditional information-gathering techniques and the process of developing rapport through actions (Feldman et al., 2003). Such commitment acts mandate a careful balance between becoming too personally invested with the respondents and preserving the ability to step back to process the data.

Discussion

Why is it important to understand the nuances of access? It is because the failure or success of qualitative research depends on the ability to gain, negotiate, and maintain access. Researchers will encounter barriers to access on multiple levels, as well as some conflicting interests from the participants in the project and the researcher's presence in the group. In framing access as emerging, fluid, and interwoven, researchers strive to view the process of access as a continuous process. This is because researchers will continuously face new situations, new doors, and different individuals in fieldwork. As a result, it is essential to develop an understanding of things that can

support or challenge the ongoing access process. Once a better understanding of how identity and commitment acts can help rapport, the data collection process can be enriched.

There are potential consequences when identity and commitment acts are utilized to gain access. These potential consequences can include the relationship with the respondents, the researcher's integrity, and the ability to publish their work. There are no concrete solutions to issues in gaining access as well as to the choices researchers will encounter when deciding on what decisions to make in specific situations. The researcher may need to juggle gaining access with the integrity of the study with the need to compromise, cooperate, or trade off their values in maintaining access with the research group. The authors suggest that before negotiating access to the group, they think about the kind of relationship they would like with their respondents and its implications for the type of research they are doing.

Conclusion

In this study of active robbers, similar identities illustrated that the more similar the researcher was to the participants, the more comfortable they were in offering information which demonstrated how similar identities can help build trust (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016; Kleinman, 1980; Tsuda, 1998). From this experience, identity similarity can be beneficial in forming a common ground, ultimately leading to a developed rapport with participants (Doykos et al., 2014; Kleinman, 1980). It is suggested that researchers assess any similar potential identities in common with the participants to help gain access and establish a connection (Feldman et al., 2003). These shared categories of identities can provide a foundation for building trust since the ultimate goal is to become familiar, known, and accepted (Kleinman, 1980). This can consist of perceptions of similarity amongst the participants, researcher, and group, or it could involve the intersection and overlap of identities of individuals and the researcher (Feldman et al., 2003).

While the similarity in identity did work out in this study, the fact remains that it could have been a double-edged sword. It is suggested that similarities in identity can oversimplify the dynamics. For example, people of the same racial or ethnic group do not necessarily understand racism in the same way, and they do not automatically identify more closely with similar members of their group. This presumption could result in the participant assuming both people experienced a commonality that could increase trust, but at the same time, it could reduce their need for explanation. Therefore, participants who assume there is a similarity with the researcher could gloss over pertinent information from their lived experiences which the researcher might need or want to have explained (Feldman et al., 2003). This is a disadvantage and limitation of the researcher becoming a participant within the research environment. When a researcher's identity changes and becomes similar to the participant's identity, it can make it challenging to ask naïve questions that an outsider can ask and harder for participants to answer fully.

Developing and nurturing relationships is crucial for participants in the field to gain and maintain access (Bryman, 2012; Feldman et al., 2003). The type of relationship can significantly impact the degree of access, the level of transparency, and trust between the researcher and the participant. Though qualitative researchers are encouraged to develop rapport with the participants, it is frequently a systematic, long, and often mysterious process. While researchers may desire rapport, researchers cannot coax or force it from interactions; it is something that can only happen naturally with patience and openness. Typically, qualitative researchers are provided guidelines on establishing rapport, and most who have experienced it know when rapport is achieved. Nevertheless, some researchers are still not able to understand how to obtain rapport, and other researchers can specifically pinpoint which behavior leads to rapport.

Although a researcher frequently assumes a payoff of information from the more traditional research techniques, such as interviewing or general observation, the nature of commitment acts like the ones previously mentioned above does not by itself provide an assumption that anything will be gained. However, the commitment acts offer an opportunity to develop a stronger foundation of openness, trust, and rapport between the informants and the researcher. It is important to state that there is no assurance that any specific commitment act will affect the relationship positively. It could just be that the quality of the act improves the entire relationship (Feldman et al., 2003). This is because the individual now begins to view the researcher as someone more than a researcher looking for information and now views them as someone who sees them personally. The process of gaining access is not a dichotomous variable, which means that the researcher is not one day 'without' access and is fully immersed the next day. There could be 'false starts' initially entering the field, whereas your gatekeeper may not work out as hoped, leaving you to find someone else to be your gatekeeper (Louvrier, 2018).

Furthermore, the necessity for a commitment act may be an ongoing process, and the trust others feel toward you may come and go throughout the study. The point is that gaining access is an ongoing activity and is not a one-time shot. The process of gaining access will keep the researcher focused on the necessity to preserve the relationships in the field. It will also move them to not burn any bridge for short-term gain, as in getting a confession from an informant.

Limitations and Future Implications

Although this study with robbers was not without its challenges, the authors feel assured of the potential benefits the paper can provide future researchers. The goal was to analyze how identity, rapport, and commitment acts can lead to increased access opportunities with respondents. Despite the success in identifying numerous points, the authors did not illustrate how the commitment acts could have failed, thereby resulting in less rapport. Additionally, since the primary author and participants had a similar backgrounds and identities, it did not allow the researcher to fully experience true blocked access. If this would have occurred, then attempting to gain access with uncooperative respondents, after already obtaining gatekeeper approval, can put the researcher in an awkward and potentially unsafe position (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991; Wax, 1971). Gaining access in fieldwork can be an unpredictable, complex, and ill-defined process (Burgess, 1991; Clark, 2010; Feldman et al., 2003). The experiences presented in this paper contribute to understanding how identity, relationships, and commitment acts can help a researcher gain access. This paper also illustrates that simply gaining access at the gatekeeper level does not guarantee access through the varying levels (e.g., doors) within the group's environment (Burgess, 1991; Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016; Johnson, 1975). While each research site is unique, it is essential to learn the context of what is valued and who can open doors, and who can block access.

In textbooks, conducting a qualitative research project sounds straightforward. However, the books are not clear enough regarding how to negotiate access with the initial gatekeeper, and even less with gaining access to informants and internal sponsors. For example, some textbooks may simply state: Once the physical location has been selected, the cooperation of the individuals within the environment is needed to obtain the required information. This may sound easy, but it is actually a complex process fraught with challenges in developing access and trust. At every stage of the process, access to participants needs to be constantly renegotiated. Therefore, it is evident that obtaining permission to enter the field or even to be introduced to individuals is an incredibly different scenario than accessing them. The latter is concerned with rapport, trust, and engagement between the researcher and the individual. Thus, the qualitative researcher needs to be mindful of how the path of fieldwork was shaped as well as by the manner in which the built relationships

were formed with the gatekeeper and informants. As researchers, we argue that the researcher-participant relationship that emerges in the field through the strategies of identity, rapport, and commitment acts are important to gain access, and we encourage future scholars to further examine these access strategies.

While it is understood that gatekeepers, key informants, and internal sponsors are vital to a qualitative project, the process of gaining access is not clearly discussed in the literature (Clark, 2010). Furthermore, using identity and commitment acts to build rapport in order to gain access is absent in the literature. There is also a relatively small amount of literature on what a commitment act is, and how it can assist in access and rapport development. As a result, it is suggested that literature and textbooks expand research on how identity and commitment acts can support the access process as well as potentially hinder it. It is also suggested there be a deeper explanation of the process to gain access to textbooks and college courses. There is a need to include the challenging steps of gaining access, and a lesser need to broadly mention them in basic terms of developing rapport. There is also a need to inform future researchers of the realistic obstacles in engagement in qualitative research. More importantly, researchers need to understand that they can use their identity and acts of commitment as tools in rapport development.

References

Agar, M. (1980/1996). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography* (2nd ed.). Academic Press.

Berg, B. L. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for social sciences: An introduction to theories and methods*. (5th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.

Berk, R. A., & Adams, J. M. (1970). Establishing rapport with deviant groups. *Social Problems, 18*(1), 102-117. https://doi.org/10.2307/799884

Biernancki, P., & Waldof, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research, 10*(2), 141-163. https://doi.org/10.1177/004912418101000205

Blix, S. B., & Wettergren, A. (2015). The emotional labour of gaining and maintaining access to the field. *Qualitative Research, 15*(6), 688-704. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114561348

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. (4th ed.). Allyn & Bacon.

Brannick, T., & Coghlan, D. (2007). In defense of being "native": The case for insider academic research. *Organizational Research Methods, 10*(1), 59-74. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428106289253

Brink, P. J., & Edgecombe, N. (2003). What is becoming of ethnography? *Qualitative Health Research, 13*(7), 1028-1030. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732303253542

Brown, C., McCullough, A & de Monthoux, P. G. (1977). *The access-casebook: Social scientist account for how to get data for field research*. Teknisk Hogskoletteratur i Stockholm AB.

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Burgess, R. G. (1991). Sponsors, gatekeepers, members, and friends: Access in educational settings. In W. B. Shaffir & R. A. Stebbins (Eds.), *Experiencing fieldwork: An inside view of qualitative research* (pp. 43-52). SAGE Publications.

Burmeister, E., & Aitken, L. M. (2012). Sample size: How many is enough? *Australian Critical Care, 25*(4), 271-274. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aucc.2012.07.002

Chambliss, W. (1975). On the paucity of research on organized crime: A reply to Galliher and cain. *American Sociologist, 10*(1), 36-39. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27702159

Children's Health. (2019). *Beyond ABC: Growing up in Dallas county: Assessing our children's quality of life*. Medical Center and the Coalition for North Texas Children. https://www.childrens.com/keeping-families-healthy/dfw-childrens-health-assessment

Clark, T. (2010). Gaining access and maintaining access: Exploring the mechanisms that support and challenge the relationship between gatekeepers and researchers. *Qualitative Social Work, 10*(4), 485-502. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325009358228

Corra, M., & Willer, D. (2002). The gatekeeper. *Sociological Theory, 20*(2), 180-207. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9558.00158

Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of anti-discrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. In K. T. Bartlett & R. Kennedy. (Eds.), *Feminist legal theory: Readings in law and gender* (pp. 57-80). Westview.

Creswell, J. W. (2007*). Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications.

Crowley, J. E. (2007). Friend or foe? Self-expression, stigmatized groups, and the researcher-participant relationship. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 36*(6), 603-630. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606293603

Cunliffe, A. L., & Alcadipani, R. (2016). The politics of access in fieldwork: Immersion, backstage dramas, and deception. *Organizational Research Methods, 19*(4), 535-561. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428116639134

Czarniawska, B. (1998). *A narrative approach to organization studies*. SAGE Publications.

Daniel-Echols, M. (2003). How I got them to talk to me: The importance of persistence, personality, and identity. In M. Feldman, J. Bell, & M. Berger. (Eds.), *Gaining access: A practical and theoretical guide for qualitative research*. (pp. 106-110). Altamira Press.

De Laine, M. (2000). *Fieldwork, participation and practice: Ethics and dilemmas in qualitative research.* SAGE Publications.

Decker, S. H. & van Winkle, B. (1996). *Life in the gang: Family, friends, and violence*. Cambridge University Press.

Dempsey, L., Dowling, M., Larkin, P., & Murphy, K. (2016). Sensitive interviewing in qualitative research. *Research in Nursing & Health, 39*(6), 480-490. https://doi.org/10.1002/nur.21743

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2003). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. SAGE Publications.

DeShay, R. A., Vasquez, A. G., & Vieraitis, L. M. (2020). "You gotta have a plan so you won't get caught": Managing the risks of street tagging. *Deviant Behavior*, *42*(9), 1112-11129. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2020.1722339

DiIuIio, J. (1987). *Governing prisons: A comparative study of correctional management*. Free Press.

Dovick, M. (2013). Personal communication, August 31, 2013. Gang Intelligence Unit, School District.

Doykos, B., Brinkley-Rubinstein, L., Craven, K., McCormack, M., & Geller, J. (2014). Leveraging identity, gaining access: Explorations of self in diverse field-based research setting. *Journal of Community Practice, 22*(1-2), 130-149. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2014.901265

Feldman, M., Bell, J., & Berger, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Gaining access: A practical and theoretical guide for qualitative researchers*. Altamira Press.

Fenno, R. (1978). *Homestyle: House members and their districts*. Little Brown.

Fusch, P. I. & Ness, L. R. (2015). Are we there yet? Data saturation in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report, 20*(9), 1408-1416. http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR20/9fusch1.pdf

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.

Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. (2nd ed). Longman.

Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. Longman.

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59-82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1995). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. Routledge.

Hargadon, A. B., & Bechky, B. A. (2006). When collections of creatives become creative collections: A field study of problem solving at work. *Organization Science, 17*(4), 484-500. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1060.0200

Harrington, B. (2003). The social psychology of access in ethnographic research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 32*(5), 592-625. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241603255677

Hochstetler, A. (2001). Opportunities and decisions: Interactional dynamics in robbery and burglary groups. *Criminology, 39*(3), 737-764. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2001.tb00939.x

Huot, S. (2014). Ethnography: Understanding occupation through an examination of culture. In S. Naylor & M. Stanley (Eds.), *Qualitative research methodologies for occupational science and therapy* (pp. 100-116). Routledge.

Irwin, J. D. (1972). Participant observation of criminals. In J. J. Douglas (Eds), *Research on deviance* (pp. 117-137). Random House.

Johnson, J. M. (1975). *Doing field research*. Free Press.

Kennedy-Macfoy, M. (2013). 'It's important for the students to meet someone like you.' How perceptions of the researcher can affect gaining access, building rapport and securing cooperation in school-based research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 16*(6), 491-502. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2013.823294

Kleinman, S. (1980). Learning the ropes as fieldwork analysis. In W. Shaffer, R. A Stebbins, & A. Turowets (Eds.), *Fieldwork experience: Qualitative approaches to social research*. (pp. 171-183). St. Martin's.

Louvrier, J. (2018). Negotiating, gaining, and maintaining access: What can we learn about diversity? In *Handbook of Research Methods in Diversity Management, Equality, and Inclusion at Work.* (pp. 85-102). Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783476084.00012

Lumsden, K. (2009). 'Don't ask a woman to do another woman's job': Gendered interactions and the emotional ethnographer. *Sociology, 43*(3), 497-513. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509103205

MacLean, T., Anteby, M., Hudson, B., & Rudolph, J. W. (2006). Talking tainted topics: Insights and ideas on researching socially disapproved organizational behavior. *Journal of Management Inquiry, 15*(1), 59-68. https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492605280223

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design: An interactive research approach*. SAGE Publications.

McNaughton, N. C., Mills, L., Kotecha, M. (2014). Observation. In J. R., J. Lewis, & C. M. Nicholls (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (2nd ed., pp. 243-265). SAGE Publications.

Michel, A. (2014). The mutual constitution of persons and organizations: An ontological perspective on organizational change. *Organization Science, 25*(4), 1082-1110. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2013.0887

Okumus, F., Altinay, L., & Roper, A. (2007). Gaining access for research: Reflections from experience. *Annals of Tourism Research, 34*(1), 7-26.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Polsky, N. (1967). *Hustlers, beats, and others*. Pelican.

Reeves, C. L. (2010). A difficult negotiation: Fieldwork relations with gatekeepers. *Qualitative Research, 10*(3), 315-331. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794109360150

Rossman, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Scourfield, P. (2012). Defenders against threats or enablers of opportunities: The screening role played by gatekeepers in researching older people in care homes. *Qualitative Report, 17*(28), 1-17. http://www.nova.edu/sss/QR/QR17/scourfield.pdf

Shaffir, W. B., & Stebbins, R. A. (1991). *Experiencing fieldwork: An inside view of qualitative research*. SAGE Publications.

Shaffir, W. B., Stebbins, & Turowetz, A. (1980). *Fieldwork experience: Qualitative approaches to social research*. St. Martin's Press.

Sixsmith, L., Boneham, M., & Goldring, J. E. (2003). Accessing the community: Gaining insider perspectives from the outside. *Qualitative Health Research, 13*(4), 578-589.

Spradley, J. (1980). *Participant observation*. Holt, Reinhart, and Winston.

Spradley, J. T. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Stoller, P. (1989). *The taste of ethnographic things: The senses of anthropology*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Taylor, S. J. & Bogdan, R. (1998). I*ntroduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource*. John Wiley.

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Tsuda, T. (1998). Ethnicity and the anthropologist: Negotiating identities in the field. *Anthropological Quarterly, 71*(3), 878-890. https://doi.org/10.2307/3318081

U.S. Census Bureau (2013). *County: State and county quick facts*. http://www.census.gov/quickfacts.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2017). *Office of the assistant secretary for planning and evaluation: Poverty research*. https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-research

Van den Brink, M., & Benschop, Y. (2014). Gender in academic networking: The role of gatekeepers in professional recruitment. *Journal of Management Studies, 51*(3), 460-492. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12060

Van Maanen, J. (1998). *Tales of the field*. University of Chicago Press.

Vasquez, A. G., & Vieraitis, L. M. (2016). "It's just paint": Street taggers' use of neutralization techniques. *Deviant Behavior, 37*(10), 1179-1195. https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2016.1169830

Vasquez, A. G., Rodriguez, A., Suh, J., & Martinez-Cosio, M. (2020). Appointment robbery: Do crime prevention through environmental design strategies work? Voices from the street. *American Journal of Qualitative Research, 4*(1), 17-38. https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/8203

Wanat, C. L. (2008). Getting past the gatekeepers: Differences between access and cooperation in public school research. *Field Methods, 20*(2), 191-208. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X07313811

Watters, J., & Biernacki, P. (1989). Targeted sampling. Options for the study of hidden populations. *Social Problems, 36*, 416-430. https://doi.org/10.2307/800824

Wax, R. (1971). *Doing fieldwork: Warnings and advice*. University of Chicago.

Wright, R. T., Decker, S. H., Redfern, A. K., & Smith, D. L. (1992). A snowball's chance in hell: Doing fieldwork with active residential burglars. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *29*(2), 148-161. https://doi.org/10.1177/002242789202900200

Notes on Contributors

Arthur G. Vasquez is a visiting assistant professor in the criminology and criminal justice department at the University of Texas at Dallas. Professor Vasquez has a Ph.D. in Public Administration and Public Policy with an emphasis in Criminology from the University of Texas at Arlington, a Master's in Criminology from UT Dallas, a Master's in Counseling from University of North Texas, and a Master's in Public Administration from UT Arlington. His research interest focuses on policy, active offenders, delinquency, and qualitative methods.

Alejandro Rodriguez is an Associate Professor in the College of Architecture, Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Texas-Arlington. Professor Rodriguez has a Ph.D. in Public Administration from Florida International University, and a Master's in Public Administration from Marist College, New York. His research interest focuses on public administration theory, culture, government reform, and budgeting. His recent publications include "Conceptualizing Leadership Psychosis: The Department of Veteran Affairs Scandal," "Defining Governance in Latin America," and "Cultural Differences: A Cross-cultural Study of Urban Planners from Japan, Mexico, the U.S., Serbia-Montenegro, Russia, and South Korea."

ORCID

Arthur G. Vasquez, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3803-2019
Alejandro Rodriguez, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6819-6300

Manuscript received July 19, 2022
Final revision received October 07, 2022
Accepted October 07, 2022