

What is 'access' in the context of qualitative research?

Qualitative Research

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect upon access in the context of qualitative research, which I define as the process by which a researcher and the sites and/or individuals he or she studies relate to each other, through which the research in question is enabled. Access is a dynamic and multidirectional process, which depends on the researcher's ability to access and to develop a 'multiple vision', and on the researcher's and the research's accessibility. Access influences the research process and results, and is shaped by power dynamics. Awareness of the complexity of access will help qualitative researchers to make more conscious and deliberate decisions, for example on which vantage points to include or exclude, or on how to protect participants and themselves. I illustrate my points of reflection with the help of vignettes from my research on the organizational dynamics behind the Greenpeace campaign against Norwegian whaling. I discuss implications for practice, and argue that perceiving of qualitative research as craftwork can help researchers to sustain complex notions of access.

Keywords

access, accessibility of research projects, craftwork, fieldwork relations, methodology, multiple vision, power

Introduction

Access is a central and familiar issue for qualitative researchers. It is self-evident that they need to gain, and maintain, access to field sites and informants in order to carry out their research projects. Implicitly, qualitative researchers sometimes see access simply as a part of their evaluation of the feasibility of a project. The centrality and familiarity of the issue of 'gaining access,' of the concept of access in qualitative research can have the effect of preventing qualitative researchers from pausing to think deeply and re-examine

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what they are assuming about it. It can prevent them from scrutinizing what they say about it, and what they don't say about it (Cheek, 2011b). As a result, they may treat access as a practical problem to be solved so that they can do their research.

Such an instrumental approach to access becomes more likely as researchers are held responsible to produce ever more measurable results in the form of (certain types of) publications and acquisition of external research funding, and at the same time to comply with ever stricter demands and procedures (Wigfall et al., 2013: 592; see also Atkinson, 2009). Researchers need to get their projects funded by external actors, and/or approved by institutional review boards or ethics committees. They may find that they need to plan projects in detail in advance even where the nature of the research itself is very much emergent (see Atkinson, 2009; Cheek, 2011a). Under pressure to perform and deliver, qualitative researchers may start thinking of their research projects as a series of steps that must be undertaken in order to live up to the expectations (Cheek, 2008). 'Getting access' and proving that one has done so may simply be perceived as one of those steps. It may be perceived as a box to be ticked.

The aim of this article is to de-familiarize access, to pause and examine it. I want to reflect upon what access in qualitative research is, what it depends on, and how it influences qualitative research. Awareness of the complexity of access will help qualitative researchers to make more conscious and deliberate decisions. I illustrate my points using my own qualitative research on the organizational dynamics behind the campaign against Norwegian whaling run by Greenpeace Nordic, the Greenpeace chapter responsible for campaigns in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. I discuss implications for practice, and argue that perceiving of qualitative research as craftwork can help researchers to sustain complex notions of access.

Access is a relational process

The aim of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of people's realities. Seen from a constructivist perspective on knowledge, human beings create their realities in the form of alterable mental constructions which are sustained by social processes. Knowledge is historically and culturally specific and relative (Burr, 2003; Guba and Lincoln, 1998).

Researchers do not have direct access to others' mental processes and thus, their reality constructions. Mental processes remain inaccessible to communication (see for example Maturana, 1999; Luhmann, 1995). However, through interaction, researchers can elicit others' accounts of their reality. Researchers can further produce their own mental construction of what others' reality is, and use the differences between their own account and the accounts given by those they studied as material for reflection and insight (Czarniawska, 1998: 30).

Thus, knowledge produced by qualitative research is always co-created between researcher and researched; it is always relational (see for example Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). The researcher and the research participants together produce a depiction of participants' reality. How this depiction of participants' reality turns out depends both on the researcher's relating to the participants and on the participants' relating to the researcher. It depends on the decisions the researcher and the

participants make on how to position themselves in relation to each other, positioning being ‘the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines’ (Davies and Harré, 1991: 48).

Researchers’ mental processes are inaccessible to research participants, too. Participants will produce their own mental constructions of what the researchers’ mental processes and constructions, personal motives, etc. are. Participants may perceive the researcher as an intruder, a nuisance (Czarniawska, 1998: 24) or a spy (Plankey-Videla, 2012; Sampson and Thomas, 2003). They may perceive the researcher as someone who gives them a welcome opportunity to tell their story (Feldman et al., 2003) and to compare their own experiences with those of others (Clark, 2010), as a facilitator of their own thinking and sounding board for their ideas (Welch et al., 2002), or as many other things. Their degree and manner of involvement with the research project, what and how much they tell the researcher, how they position themselves in relation to broader discourses in the presence of the researcher (Davies and Harré, 1991) will vary accordingly. Researchers may feel that they are supplicants, asking participants for information and support while having little to give back (see Feldman et al., 2003; Van Maanen, 1999), or that they are a kind of social activists who give voice to, empower, and represent those whom they study, or many other things. How they perceive the studied setting, what questions they ask participants, how they interpret and portray the setting in their publications will vary accordingly.

In order to reflect how knowledge is produced in qualitative research, access in qualitative research must be understood as relational and processual. This is stated clearly in the two books that I am aware of that are wholly devoted to the topic of access: According to Brown et al. (1976) access implies ‘the process by which empirical data are produced. To obtain access there has to be a relation between the researcher and his environment’ (1976: 11). Feldman et al. (2003) define access as ‘a process of building relationships’ (p. vii). For the purposes of this article, I define access in the context of qualitative research as *the process by which a researcher and the sites and/or individuals he or she studies relate to each other, through which the research in question is enabled*. Access is the ‘how’ of researchers’ and participants’ mental processes, interaction, communication and positioning that pertain to the research in question.

Access is an ongoing and dynamic process which lasts as long as the research project (Czarniawska, 1998; Feldman et al., 2003; Fielding, 2004). Throughout a project, participants and researchers will take many decisions on how to relate to each other, how to position themselves in relation to each other. Researchers need to negotiate and renegotiate access throughout. Leaving the field is also part of access (Feldman et al., 2003; see also Marshall and Rossman, 2011; Taylor, 1999). Reeves (2010) carried out fieldwork with sex offenders and staff in a probation hostel. What she considered to be research relationships in which she was not personally invested, some participants considered to be tentative friendships or therapeutic relationships. This made exiting the field and positioning herself in a different way delicate. A researcher’s final positioning decision in relation to a studied setting is how to portray it in reports or publications.

Access is a multidirectional process. Gatekeepers may restrict researchers' access because they fear that potential informants will be harmed by the research (Berger, 2003; Rugkåsa and Canvin, 2011), or for presumably more egoistic reasons (see Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Or they may be helpful and willing to work hard to enable researchers' access to informants and to make the research project happen (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). A research participant may not trust researchers entirely if they gained access via a gatekeeper who is higher up in the hierarchy than the participant is (Burgess, 1984: 39). Or a participant may be open and trusting in relation to researchers because a gatekeeper whom the participant likes and trusts endorsed the research project and vouched for the researchers. Every time, researchers must choose how to position themselves in relation to the different people involved.

Doing my research on the organizational dynamics behind Greenpeace's campaign against Norwegian whaling, I needed to gain an understanding of Greenpeacers' as well as Norwegians' realities. The following illustrates how, interacting with Greenpeacers and Norwegians, I elicited accounts of their realities, and produced my own mental constructions of what their realities were. The vignette makes it clear that the results of the research depended both on my relating to the participants and on the participants' relating to me; that my access was a dynamic relational process.

In my initial interactions with Nordic Greenpeacers, my attitude was that commercial whaling was unacceptable slaughter of an extraordinary, endangered species, and that it was Greenpeace's moral duty to stop it. I was shocked to find that many Nordic Greenpeacers saw whales as no more extraordinary than, or just as extraordinary as, fish; did not mind if some whales were killed and eaten by humans; and thought that Greenpeace had more important things to campaign against than Norwegian whaling. They thought that my attitude was pretty typical of Germans of my class and background.

After I had worked volunteer for Greenpeace Nordic for a year, I more or less adopted their view of whales. Like the Nordic Greenpeacers, I still opposed Norwegian commercial whaling, however. I thought that the international moratorium against commercial whaling had to be respected, lest there develop market dynamics that lead to renewed overexploitation of global whale stocks. I participated in Greenpeace protests against Norwegian whaling. I was surprised to find that many Norwegians perceived these protests (and me) as misinformed or lying, oppressive, sentimental, self-serving and hypocritical.

Doing qualitative research on the case for several years, I came to understand the deep historical and cultural roots of the Norwegian resistance to the international protests against their whaling. I understood that in the history of the Greenpeace whale campaign, non-Scandinavian Greenpeacers had failed to understand these roots. Nordic and particularly Norwegian Greenpeacers had been torn between their national identity and understanding versus their Greenpeace identity and understanding. I was amazed when Nordic Greenpeacers told me that Greenpeace's campaigning against Norwegian whaling had been counterproductive, as well as very personally frustrating for them, for years.

While the differences between the different accounts and reality constructions were confusing, as a researcher I could use these differences as material for reflection and insight.

Access depends on the researcher's ability to access

The work of the qualitative researcher is characterized by an inescapable paradox. On the one hand, their own structure of cognition, their own personal ability to produce and process information, is the only structure they have to produce understanding. Thus, while they can collect others' accounts, use computers, etc., the information they produce will always reflect their own point of view, articulated and unarticulated assumptions, limits, focus, and so on. On the other hand, the qualitative researcher usually aims for an understanding of others', rather than his or her own, realities. And s/he aims to make the understanding of the individuals, sites, cases, issues, or interactive systems s/he studies as comprehensive as possible. To gain such comprehensive understanding of others' realities, s/he has to use several perspectives, has to pay attention to and describe situations from different points of view. Access depends on the extent to which researchers manage to achieve such a 'multiple vision' (see Bateson 2004), while inevitably using their own eyes. It depends on which different 'hats' they manage to put on and on whether they can put themselves in others' 'shoes', while inevitably using their own heads and bodies to do so.

A 'multiple vision' requires that researchers **question** their habitual thought patterns. Only a 'passion and identification that *does not want* anything, [...] in the total turning of the attention [toward that which is studied] while releasing all egocentric thought, opens up access' (Heshusius, 1994: 17, italics in original). Heshusius illustrates this with an example relating to her own experience in conducting a qualitative study with persons labeled retarded.

I spent almost a year in a group home, engaged in participant observation. I remember distinctly being confronted early on with power and status differences that stood in the way of fully attending. I was forced to recognize my upbringing, values, and related emotions until I finally came to pose the question [...]: Could I imagine such a life for myself?

Only when Heshusius could start seeing participants' lives as worthy for herself or for her children could she be fully attentive (1994: 19). In the real life of qualitative researchers, practical factors work against such deep immersion in others' realities. For one thing, the time they have available to spend in the field is limited. However, the point is that access will change according to how researchers are able, and allow themselves, to relate to participants and to sites. A focus on 'being granted' access 'by informants' may prevent them from thinking about how they sometimes fail to 'give' themselves access.

For example, feelings, as well as behavioral responses (including 'making mistakes') and bodily responses, are part of the process by which a researcher and the site he or she studies relate to each other (Holmes, 2014). They are an important part of the social reality which qualitative researchers want to understand (Freund, 1988; see also for example Bourdieu, 2001). With careful exploration, they can become crucial information (see Stein, 2001). Yet researchers may ignore, suppress or deny unwelcome emotions and responses (both their own or those of participants), or fail to examine them. One reason for this may be that doing otherwise would conflict with their notions about rigor in carrying out research (see Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). They may thus not relate to participants and to sites to the greatest possible extent, not make the most of their access.

Lee-Treweek (2000) describes how she became convinced that the difficult emotions, such as despair and unhappiness, which she had during her fieldwork in a home for older people, were ‘an indication of a bad attitude to the field’ (2000: 122). She felt that her account of these emotions in her research diary contributed nothing to her research, and that as the diary made such depressing reading, it was ‘pure masochism’ to look at it again (2000: 123). But she came to realize that her record of her emotional responses had something to contribute to her understanding of the old people’s home and its ‘emotion rules’ (2000: 126), and of the experiences of those who worked there. She used a personal counsellor as a sounding board for her data and ideas about home life. She was thus able to ‘give’ herself better access to her emotions; to relate differently to the research site and the participants; and consequently to gain better insight.

Writing is a way for qualitative researchers to access what they study. When writing about the subject(s) of their research, qualitative researchers can become aware of their own habitual thought patterns, feelings, assumptions and limitations, and of inconsistencies in their interpretations. They can develop a multiple vision by writing from different perspectives. They can become aware of connections and patterns in their material which they did not see before. Writing is a method of discovery, inquiry and analysis; it is a way of turning the researcher’s attention toward what is studied, and of relating with it (Richardson, 2000; see also Strauss, 1987).

The following vignette illustrates how my research on Greenpeace depended, not only on being granted access by informants, but also on my own ability to access. It illustrates how my habitual thought patterns lessened my ability to achieve a ‘multiple vision’.

I ‘got’ excellent access for my research project because I had worked volunteer for Greenpeace Nordic for a year. Thus even Greenpeacers who had had very negative experiences with the anti-whaling campaign trusted me and granted me open-hearted interviews. However, it took years before I was able to view the case from certain perspectives that were relevant to my project, but difficult for me. For example: Greenpeace was an idealistic, unselfish group with good principles such as nonviolence. Why did some Norwegians see Greenpeace as a group of cultural imperialists, even terrorists? It must be because these Norwegians were egoistic, self-serving, narrow-minded nationalists. Or: It was obvious for years that Greenpeace’s campaigning against whaling in Norway was counterproductive. Why did Greenpeacers in the UK or Germany not understand this? It must be because they were bureaucratic, self-satisfied, stupid smart-alecs.

When I managed to **question** habitual thought patterns (such as ‘Greenpeace is an idealistic group with good principles’), I was able to relate to participants and sites differently, and to gain an understanding of new points of view (for example that of Norwegian whalers).

Access depends on the researcher’s and the research’s accessibility

According to whether the researcher feels mostly like a supplicant, a social activist, or something else in relation to research participants, the access to the process of co-creation of knowledge that the researcher gives to participants will vary. Access depends on how the researcher allows and enables participants to relate to her.

Implicitly, most qualitative researchers recognize this. For example, they understand that they need to give potential participants information about their projects (Buchanan et al., 1988; Feldman et al., 2003; Marshall and Rossman, 2011), or that their identity (for example, aspects such as race or gender) is an important factor in their relationship with potential informants (Feldman et al., 2003). But the fact that their explicit focus often is on ‘being granted’ access ‘by informants’ may make them blind for ways in which they unwittingly fail to make their research projects accessible to potential participants.

Wendler et al. (2006) analyzed enrollment decisions of over 70,000 individuals for a broad range of health research, to evaluate the claim that racial and ethnic minority groups in the US are less willing than non-Hispanic whites to participate in health research. They conclude that racial and ethnic minorities in the US are as willing as non-Hispanic whites to participate in health research, and that willingness to enroll often is more a function of the characteristics of individual studies – in effect, accessibility or lack thereof – than a function of racial or ethnic identity.

Doing my Greenpeace research, I understandably was focused on the task of ‘getting’ access ‘to informants’. But maybe I should have thought more about how to make my project accessible to participants?

When I had written a complete enough draft of my analysis of the Greenpeace case, I suggested to Greenpeace Nordic’s Executive Director and whale campaign manager that I do a ‘member check’. I could give a presentation of my results at the Greenpeace Nordic headquarters, and anyone interested, particularly those I had interviewed for the research project, would be able to comment. They would thus have a say in the final product. The ED and the whale campaign manager were less than enthusiastic about the idea. The member check never happened. (Other qualitative researchers have similar experiences, see Stake 1995.) Looking back, I wonder whether I could have made this more accessible for Greenpeace Nordic. The ED and the whale campaign manager had stepped into those roles after I had done my fieldwork. Should I have planned and announced at the start of my fieldwork, together with the person who was then the ED, that there would be a member check? Could this have been a part of a better overarching collaboration strategy between Greenpeace and me, which would have projected deliverables that in form and content were of interest specifically for Greenpeace? I had produced an ‘academic’ analysis, but how interesting can it be, for people who are busy doing their work, to listen to academic analyses of their (past) work (see also Kurzman 1991)?

It is of course impossible to know whether such an overarching collaboration strategy would have worked out. But the point is that it did not occur to me to try for such a strategy; not because I lacked the will or interest, but because I was not aware that it could be a good idea.

Access influences the research process and results

Access is the ‘how’ of the research relationship. As such, it influences the research process. Notably, it preconditions consent in qualitative research. The difficulties of ensuring informed consent in qualitative research are well-known. Insofar as the nature of qualitative research is emergent, it can be all but impossible to elicit consent that is ‘informed’ in the sense of being predictable and explicable before the research is carried

out (Atkinson 2009; Fine 1993). At times, researchers are reluctant to give participants information, because participants' responses are likely to be skewed if they know the research goals (Fine 1993).

Informed consent can be seen as a complex process that needs to be maintained throughout the research project and requires an active self-reflective stance (Plankey-Videla 2012). How researchers are willing and able to relate to and position themselves in relation to research participants will shape their ability and willingness to inform participants about the research. How participants are willing and able to relate to and position themselves in relation to researchers will shape their ability and willingness to give their informed consent. For example, Fielding (2004) reports how a policeman reacted with near-incredulity and a sense of betrayal when Fielding wrote down a (positive) field note about him: 'You mean you're writing things down about *me*?!' (2004: 257). Fielding had overestimated how much the officer understood about what Fielding was doing in the research project. Thus, the more conscious researchers are of the dynamics of access in a given research project, the more consciously they can shape the complex process that is consent. As Atkinson (2009) points out, a trustful relationship between researcher and participants can make the issue of informed consent less problematic.

Access influences not only the research process, but also the research results. The understanding that results from the research depends on the mental processes of both participants and researchers, and on how their interaction, communication and positioning influences these. Depending on a researcher's access to the realities he or she studies, and depending on the access the subjects of study have to a researcher and a research project, there are different vantage points from which the realities that are studied, can be viewed. The researcher's multiple vision changes if access changes.

It is impossible to be all-seeing and all-knowing. Inevitably, research results depend on researchers and their decisions. These decisions have an ethical dimension to them. The more conscious qualitative researchers are of the complexity of access and of the influence it has on the research process and results, the more informed their decisions will be. The aim must be to shape access and to include or exclude vantage points as consciously as possible.

For example, if minorities are underrepresented in health research, the findings of such research may not be applicable to or suitable for diverse populations (Neufeld et al., 2001; Yancey et al., 2006). If minorities can be more adequately represented by making the research more accessible, findings will be more widely applicable. This requires an awareness on the part of researchers of the accessibility, or lack thereof, of their research.

The following vignette illustrates the multiple vision I have developed of Greenpeace, thanks to the good access I enjoyed in my research project and to my conscious switching between perspectives.

My qualitative research has enabled me to look at the Greenpeace campaign against Norwegian whaling from many different vantage points. I have argued in my publications that it would be important for Greenpeace to work through the dilemmas of the campaign and to win the campaign. I have also argued that Greenpeace should stop campaigning against Norwegian whaling and focus on other work that is more important. I have argued that Greenpeace failed to understand crucial information because it lacked the preconditions to identify it as

information. I have also argued that Greenpeace used organizational defense mechanisms in order to avoid taking on board crucial but uncomfortable information. I like the idea of creating a hologram of the complex organization Greenpeace (see Czarniawska-Joerges 1992). Depending on from where you look at it, it is going to look different.

Access is shaped by power dynamics

In an article reflecting on the complexity of access in qualitative research, it is utterly necessary to acknowledge that access is shaped by power dynamics. A qualitative researcher who wants to take conscious and deliberate decisions in his or her research, needs to be aware of the importance of power dynamics for access. The aim of this section is to highlight and illustrate this. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that I cannot do full justice to this fundamental and complex aspect of access in this article.

According to Foucault (1982), power is a way in which certain actions modify others. It is less a confrontation than a question of government. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others.

Gatekeepers can modify and structure the (inter)actions of (potential) participants and researchers. Witham et al. (2015) describe how health care professionals limited the researchers' access to potential participants in a study involving people with dementia, intellectual disabilities and mental health problems. They argue that by exercising 'protective' power, the professionals refused patients the right to make informed choices as to whether they wanted to participate in the study, meaning that 'protective' power can also become oppressive. Further, participants can structure the possible field of action of researchers because the latter depend on their consent and cooperation to carry out the research project (Plankey-Videla, 2012; Reeves, 2010; see also Dahles, 2008). Participants may even wield power over researchers' personal well-being (Sampson and Thomas, 2003).

Researchers, in turn, have the power to structure the possible field of action of participants in research projects. By deciding what exactly will be studied and how, who will be involved and how, by positioning themselves towards participants, they set parameters within which participation in the process of co-creation of knowledge is possible (Cheek, 2011b). Consider Gusterson's (1995) example of studying scientists at a nuclear weapons laboratory. A researcher who strongly disagrees with these scientists politically and in terms of world view may interpret and portray their remarks exclusively 'as interesting but maladaptive rationalizations that, as the analyst if not the subject can see, misconstrue the world and enable the scientists to do a dirty job with a clean conscience' (1995: 197). The researcher does not relate to the participants as human beings who are as functional as she is, and whose perspectives make as much 'systematic sense' (1995: 199) and may be based on as much reflection and adherence to personal values as her own (1995: 197–199). The researcher precludes participation in the process of knowledge creation on such more equitable terms.

The power dynamics in the relationships between researchers and participants are again influenced and mediated by power dynamics and power structures in the academic system and in society. Academic ethics committees exercise power over researchers, over (potential) research participants, and indeed over the process of production of

knowledge, as they take decisions on what research may be conducted (Juritzen et al., 2011). Groups and topics that fall outside the priority areas set up by the organizations that allocate research funding may fail to be researched (Cheek, 2011b). Cook and Nunukoosing (2008) report that in a study conducted with impoverished elders in Australia, participants were paid for interviews. The result of this was double-edged in that it provided funds for the participants, but the payment modified the exchange of free and open discussion. Payment for participation highlighted the unequal power relationship in the interview, and there may have been a degree of coercion because participants needed the money (see also Ensign, 2003; Rugkåsa and Canvin, 2011).

All our actions will in trivial or non-trivial ways structure the possible field of action of others. In many instances, people involved in research projects find the ways in which the actions of researchers modify their own actions, unproblematic (Atkinson 2009; see also Guba and Lincoln 1989). The point is not that we should or could achieve access that is somehow free of power dynamics. Rather, the point is to be aware that access is shaped by power dynamics; that the process by which researchers and the individuals and/or sites studied relate to each other, will vary with the power dynamics that are in play. Such awareness is a necessary condition for researchers to take responsibility for the ethical choices they make in qualitative research. These include choices on how to protect participants and themselves.

The following vignette about my own research illustrates how participants who had had negative experiences with power dynamics in society structured my field of action as a researcher. It describes how I coped with this and how I protected participants and myself.

The Greenpeace anti-whaling campaign had met with a lot of resistance and critical media coverage in Norway. It was therefore not entirely surprising that some Norwegian ex-Greenpeacers who did not know me personally reacted with something akin to paranoia when I asked them for interviews. They called other Greenpeacers to ask whether I was an undercover journalist. They objected to my use of a recorder during the interview. A number of people who granted me interviews, afterwards denied me their consent to use the transcripts. I still found a sufficient number of informants who were happy to speak their minds (and some of these had been very skeptical of me in the beginning). But the quasi-paranoia of some Norwegians was infectious. I began to worry that my publications would cost Greenpeace support. I began to worry that this would have repercussions on my own future work. Two factors helped me to cope with these worries. One, a lot of time passed between the interviews and the publication of the research results. When my publications came out, the Greenpeace anti-whaling campaign was no longer as contentious in Norway as it had been previously. Two, while I described in my publications how Greenpeace's campaigning had been counterproductive, I also expressed my conviction that Greenpeace had not acted in bad faith.

It should also be noted that I was able to use informants' reactions to my research project, including their quasi-paranoia, as material for reflection.

Implications for practice

The aim of this article is to examine and reflect upon what access in qualitative research is, what it depends on, and how it influences qualitative research, in order to sharpen

awareness of the complexity of access. Such awareness will help qualitative researchers to make more conscious and deliberate decisions. It will help them to establish and nurture reciprocal and respectful relationships, not just with people as individuals but also with people as collectives, as members of communities, and with humans who live in and with other entities in the environment (as described by Tuhiwai Smith, 2005 and Denzin, 2009 for indigenous research ethics). It will induce them to acquire specialized knowledge and skills that will allow them to get involved in the relevant practices, or at least make them well-informed conversation partners (see Dahles, 2008). It will induce them to try to understand why participants engage with research projects (on reasons why people engage with qualitative research, see Clark, 2010; Feldman et al., 2003; Welch et al., 2002; see also the literature review on factors that motivate people to participate in research in Rugkåsa and Canvin, 2011).

Qualitative researchers who are aware of the complexity of access will enable participants to take part in the research projects. Examples of what this means in practice are meeting them on sites accessible to them, at times that suit them, providing child care, reimbursing them for travel expenses, or bridging language barriers (Lin, 2003; Wendler et al., 2006). Researchers' contact with the local community will help them to resolve issues such as whether or not they should offer potential participants material incentives (Ensign, 2003; see also Rugkåsa and Canvin, 2011). They will also be able to understand and portray fairly those individuals whose ideology, cultural practices, exercise of power, etc. they oppose, and to 'open up a space in their writing for the irreducible heterogeneity of human ideology and culture' (Gusterson, 1995: 201f.).

If qualitative researchers reflect on access, this means that access becomes part of the subject under study, of the substance of the research. Analysis of access can contribute towards the results of the research, because access reflects characteristics of the individuals involved and of the research site (Bondy, 2013; Brown-Saracino, 2014; see also Reeves, 2010). Importantly, this means that the boundaries or the outright denial of access also are relevant as data for the research project (see Delamont, 2004).

Bondy (2013) found that his access and research at two different field sites was shaped by conditions and practices at the sites, specifically, by the unequal manner in which the two sites engaged with discrimination issues – keeping silent versus engaging with the issues openly. Brown-Saracino (2014) found in her research project on lesbian/ bisexual/ queer communities that differential access across several field sites revealed the existence of place-specific orientations to sexual identity, as well as the relation between those orientations and informants' social networks and institutional connections. Integrationist orientations discouraged participation in her project, whereas identity-politics orientations encouraged it. Stenlås (1998) studied the influence of the Swedish business elite on Swedish politics and public opinion in the 1940s. The fact that he was denied access for research purposes to the archives of three of the Swedish industry's most important political initiatives supports his claims about the nature of this influence.

As touched upon in the introduction, the current research environment puts pressure on researchers to comply with ever stricter demands and procedures (Wigfall et al., 2013: 592) and at the same time to produce ever more measurable results. As one social science associate professor said: '[R]esearchers and scholars increasingly have to understand that they're [...] basically workers in factories' (quoted in Davies and Bansel, 2010: 16).

They invest their labor in a process aimed at producing, not so much useful insights, as results that will give them currency in the research marketplace (Cheek, 2011a). The rankings, absolute number, and citation impact of publications have more influence on researchers' careers than the publications' content. The number and size of grants researchers have won counts for more than the work they have done with the help of these grants. Researchers compete against their peers on these terms. This may push researchers towards ways and means of data gathering and knowledge production that presuppose narrow, or unreflective, understandings of access. Researchers may, quite unconsciously, come to regard research participants and sites as input factors to a production process. Looking to gain approval in the academic system, they may become alienated from their research work, letting their decisions be determined by factors that are external to them, and to the work.

This problem is a complicated one and there are no simple and quick solutions to it. One thing that may help qualitative researchers to sustain awareness of the complexity of access is the notion of qualitative research as a craft. Craft and craftsmanship is 'mastery of a form of production, which requires practical skills and personal insight' (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 73; see also Cheek, 2008; Czarniawska, 1998). Sennett (2003) reflects that when doing craft labor, we may come to detach ourselves from the opinion of others as well as to stand back from ourselves, because we focus on the job we have to do. Craftwork refocuses energies to getting an act right in itself, for oneself. This is why the experience may be a protection against invidious comparison. The craftsperson can sustain his or her self-respect in an unequal world (Sennett, 2003). If qualitative researchers think about themselves as craftspeople whose craft is to develop an understanding of the realities they study and to communicate this understanding to others in their publications, they may be able to turn their attention toward their subject while releasing their egocentric thoughts (as described by Heshusius, 1994). They may be able to find a 'passion and identification that does not want anything' (Heshusius, 1994: 17) except understand, portray and explicate the realities they study as well as they can.

That said I do not wish to propagate romanticized notions of research, or to give the impression that there are simple solutions to the problems researchers face. Which brings us to the conclusion that 'access' will continue to be a challenge for qualitative researchers.

Conclusion

'Access' will continue to be a challenge for qualitative researchers. I have argued in this article that access in qualitative research can be understood as the process by which a researcher and the sites and/or individuals he or she studies relate to each other, through which the research in question is enabled. I have argued that this process is dynamic and multidirectional; that it depends on the researcher's ability to access and to develop a 'multiple vision'; and that it depends on the researcher and the research's accessibility. I have further reflected about how access influences the research process and results, and how it is shaped by power dynamics.

I have argued in this article that reflection about and awareness of the complexity of access can enable qualitative researchers to make more conscious and deliberate

decisions. It is helpful for the research process if qualitative researchers scrutinize how they think and speak about access. In the context of my own research, therefore, this article is a starting point for such scrutiny, rather than some kind of end product or definite result. I am interested in the systematic reports and reflections on access that other qualitative researchers increasingly publish (examples that have been cited here include Bondy, 2013; Brown-Saracino, 2014; Feldman et al., 2003; and Wigfall et al., 2013). I hope that they will continue to do this. Importantly, I hope that they will report not only on what strategies and steps worked well for them with regard to negotiating access, but also on what went wrong and what they learned from this. Such reports will contribute to a literature that is real rather than sanitized (see Brown-Saracino, 2014).

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