

The Question of Gatekeeping Consent: Negotiating Organizational Access to Fieldwork

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Abstract

Conducting fieldwork in collaboration with NGOs is becoming increasingly common. However, the process and difficulties of obtaining organizational access are rarely outlined in ethnographic literature. This article unravels the author's experience of negotiating consent for fieldwork, which took place at an organizational level between an NGO and the researcher, rather than with the participants whom the consent concerned. This experience does not stand alone; various Africanist scholars have debated the role of 'gatekeepers' and explored how researchers' and gatekeepers' moral perspectives on 'protecting vulnerable participants' may clash. Drawing on the author's own experiences and similar cases from the African continent, the article investigates the potentials and challenges of negotiating with gatekeepers, such as NGOs, in the process of accessing the field and ensuring consent. This article argues that such processes are determined by the following factors: research topic, research participants, organizational characteristics, gatekeepers, and researcher positionality. Combined, these intertwined factors shape researchers' experiences of negotiating for access to conduct fieldwork with organizations. When these factors encompass ethical dilemmas that may be deemed vulnerable or sensitive, researchers are likely to encounter difficulties in their attempts to access the field. The article aims to contribute to the scholarly field which explores the difficulties of negotiating for access to conduct research, by providing an empirical case-based study. The article exemplifies the need for researchers to investigate their own unpreparedness and naivety in the field, particularly when negotiations do not come to fruition. By candidly sharing such experiences, we may provide learning opportunities for fellow researchers.

Keywords: positionality, protection, vulnerability, NGOs, Africa

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About the author

Therese Paulsen holds an MA in African Studies from the University of Copenhagen. Her academic interests revolve around challenges faced by marginalized communities in South Africa, particularly how to engage, equip, and empower young men to address gender-based violence.

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Introducing the case

“After deliberations with management, a decision has been made not to grant permission for the interviews.” With these words, the data collection for my thesis ended before it had begun.

The words form part of an email sent to me after months of negotiating for access to conduct fieldwork with a South African NGO with which I had recently completed an internship. With a long-held interest in gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, and a wish to unpack its nuances, I had pursued an internship with this small, local NGO which seeks to empower young men and equip them to mitigate GBV in their communities. I planned for the data for my MA thesis in African Studies to consist of interviews with these young men, concerning their perspectives on being part of a project that addresses GBV. The participants were approximately 17 years of age and from township¹ communities.

At the beginning of the six-month internship, I voiced my aim of collecting data. To my satisfaction, I was told that this would not be a problem for the NGO. In fact, they had a pledge to help MA students, I was informed. I thus felt that we had agreed to me conducting interviews. With this out of the way, I could focus on my role as an intern. I wished to convey that, despite being a White European woman, I had spent years familiarizing myself with the complexities of GBV, whilst also residing periodically in South Africa, and therefore possessing a prior understanding. I was excited to embark on the internship, in which I was assigned a role as mentor² for a group of these young men. I regarded it as beneficial for both the participants and my data that I would have months to establish rapport before the interviews were to be conducted towards the end of my internship. As a mentor, I experienced a willingness from these young men to share their unique insights with me. This made me

eager to conduct the interviews soon and to provide a space for their voices, thus contributing to an underexamined field of research (Casey et al. 2018; Sianis et al. 2024).

During my six-month internship, I was under the impression that an oral agreement concerning data collection was already established. Little did I know that the negotiations had far from begun. After being an intern for months, which had been problem-free, I was not prepared for the extensive process that I encountered when raising the topic of interviews again. This entailed writing a research proposal for management, having my interview guide scrutinized and alterations made to critical questions, waiting for permission to present the research proposal to the NGO's CEO, and scheduling research presentations which never materialized. The negotiation entailed a couple months of following up on the process in person and via messages to my intern supervisor from the NGO, and a failed attempt to contact the CEO directly via email. For me, it raised issues of time pressure and uncertainty regarding whether I would have data for my thesis, as I was soon departing the country. Overall, I was greatly frustrated and felt powerless. I felt that there was nothing I could do to speed up the process, and I wondered what was causing the prolonged negotiation. Did they not trust me, or was it simply standard procedure? I was informed by the NGO that my research raised concerns; the sample group was too small, questions were either too broad or too leading, the organization's donors had strict protocols, making it difficult to obtain permission, and the NGO also needed to ensure the protection of their participants. Additionally, time constraints were a factor, as staff would need to oversee the interviews. Whatever may have been the actual reason(s), the (initially perceived) granted access was revoked by the NGO, and I was left with no interviews for my thesis. It seemed that as more information about the research was acquired by the NGO, it shifted

¹ Informal settlements in South Africa.

² Title used by the NGO.

their attitude towards granting access. In all of this, I believe that both the NGO and I were caught in a conundrum of wishing to protect these young men. A dilemma like this is faced by many researchers and NGOs working with groups considered to be vulnerable. De Sardan (2005) reminds us that researchers and NGO workers operate with different logics: logics of knowledge and logics of practice, respectively. How do we as researchers address such a disparity when wishing to interview 'vulnerable' groups? How do we ensure that people are neither harmed nor ignored in our research, due to their perceived vulnerability? In this case, while the NGO and I negotiated about access to an external group of people, we may wonder, where were the voices of these young men? Why did they not have a say? What are the implications of them not being heard?

NGOs have multiple reasons to be wary of research agendas. Commitments to protect participants, entanglements in aid chains, as well as the need to avoid defamation may generate reluctance. Multiple factors can potentially explain this NGO's decisions; however, I have little insight into this. Additionally, the NGO had the right not to permit data collection. Hence, the aim of this article is not to analyse the negotiations that transpired, but rather to reflect on *why* they may have transpired, in order to equip fellow researchers for complex realities in the field, where we may encounter values and objectives that clash with our own. Due to the sensitive character of the article, the organization will remain anonymous. A limitation to this article is its scarce amount of data, as experiences and conversations are described from my perspective, without subsequent discussions with the organization. The data comprise notes from my internship journal, memos written during the thesis process, and correspondence with the NGO. Words from the negotiations are used sparingly, both due to the sensitive dynamics and to avoid discord. Thus, the article seeks to

maintain discretion while acknowledging that without addressing these experiences, we cannot learn.

This article discusses my experiences of negotiating with an NGO for access to conduct research. The NGO played a central role in obtaining access, since the participants, to my knowledge, were not asked if they wanted to be part of the research. I requested permission from the NGO to personally ask the participants if they wanted to participate in the research, but was informed that this would have to wait until management had approved the research.

Thus, the NGO decided whether access to participants was to be granted or denied. Therefore, this article asks: How do we approach consent when it involves 'vulnerable groups'? How might researchers' and gatekeepers'³ different moralities clash when it comes to protecting vulnerable participants? What are the benefits and disadvantages of 'protecting' vulnerable persons from research endeavours? And which factors influence researchers' attempts to access the field?

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, the concept of informed consent is introduced, to situate the article amongst relevant literature and to present the root of the issue in this case. Subsequently, the article explores five factors that influenced the negotiation process, to understand how multiple aspects determine access for conducting fieldwork. Thereafter, the notion of 'protecting vulnerable participants' is discussed, by unravelling how different moral conceptualizations shape negotiations between researchers and organizations, as moralities ultimately inform one's perspective on the different factors in the negotiation. The article concludes with some reflections that

³ The notion of 'gatekeeper' can be used in a variety of ways. Within research processes, gatekeepers are commonly described as individuals, groups, or organizations that operate as intermediaries between researchers and participants. Therefore, gatekeepers have the power to facilitate or inhibit researchers' access (Siwale 2015).

may be useful for other budding researchers entering the field.

Introducing informed consent

Researchers are increasingly sharing their experiences of negotiating for access to conduct fieldwork. Their debates include questions on how to ensure informed consent (Wasunna et al. 2014; Chima 2015), how to navigate a requirement to obtain individual consent in communal settings (Jeko et al. 2012; Visagie et al. 2019; Appiah et al. 2024), and how negotiations with gatekeepers are often a central part of obtaining access (Reeves 2010; Saharan et al. 2021; Miller et al. 2022). The latter is explored in this article, by departing from my own experience of navigating gatekeeper relations and drawing on other researchers' similar experiences.

At the heart of these debates lies an obligation to adhere to research ethics. The underlying aim of research ethics "is to ensure that the rights and dignity of prospective participants are acknowledged and respected" (Segalo and Molobela 2019, 36), which is integral to any research endeavour involving human participants. A central requirement of ethical research is informed consent. Research participants ought to be adequately informed of a study and any potential implications for them as individuals before deciding to participate (Wasunna et al. 2014). Informed consent is grounded in specific ethical obligations: respect for individuals' autonomy, which implies that individuals decide freely whether to participate in a study, and additional protective measures for vulnerable persons with limited autonomy (Wasunna et al. 2014). This article delves into the question of autonomy, as it may not be straightforward to respect individuals' autonomy when mechanisms are at play to protect the said individuals. Does protection ensure respect for individuals' autonomy, or might it also risk limiting it? The notion of protection is relevant in this case, as the

participants were legally considered minors and were from 'vulnerable' backgrounds. This article explores the intersection of needing to both respect and protect participants, as these obligations may clash with one another.

The article examines how other larger entities, apart from participants, shape the consent process. As researchers enter the field, they often face negotiations with gatekeepers, such as organizations or community chiefs and elders. Preparing for such negotiations beforehand is difficult. This is partly due to the limited scholarly works that address the difficulties of obtaining access, and the continuous negotiations that it typically entails. As argued by Saharan et al. (2021), the processes which ethnographic researchers find themselves in when trying to obtain access to organizations often remain implicit. Thus, there is a need for researchers to uncover the messiness of our processes, and outline the far-from-linear structure of fieldwork to better equip fellow researchers to enter the field. I experienced how my own naivety and unpreparedness meant that I was poorly equipped for field negotiations. Thus, this article seeks to contribute to a scholarly field that uncovers the difficulties of negotiating for access to conduct research (see Roesch-Marsh et al. 2012; Oscar et al. 2018; Vuban and Eta 2019), hence providing the kind of empirical reflections which I myself needed. The article illustrates examples of potential pitfalls and illuminates issues that may need addressing in order to obtain access. The article aligns itself with a growing field of literature that acknowledges researchers' own unpreparedness and naivety in the field, as well as the uncertainties that many of us experience, yet may be inclined to keep to ourselves (see Siwale 2015; Pritchard 2018; Brasher 2020; Miller et al. 2022). However, these reflections may help prepare other researchers for that which we ourselves were not prepared for. In this case, multiple intersecting factors contributed to the difficulty of obtaining access. These are now presented.

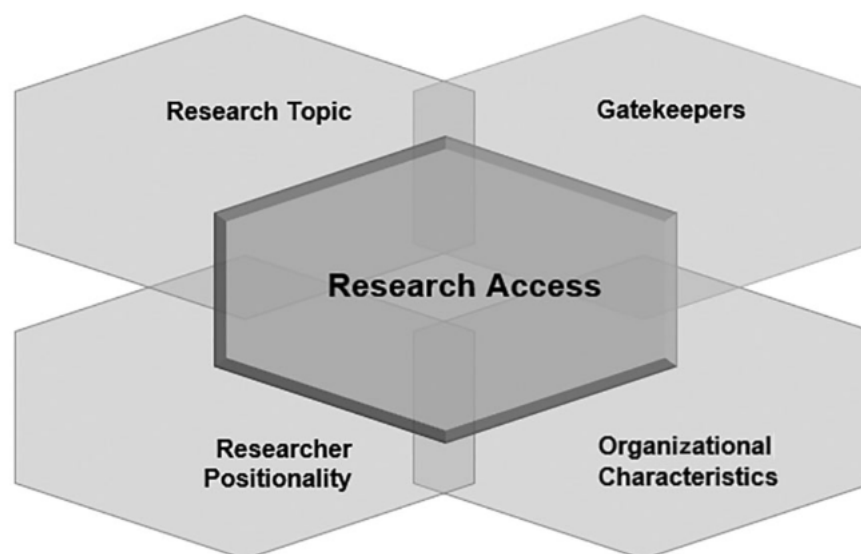


Figure 1. Factors influencing access to NGOs (Saharan et al. 2021, 4).

Factors influencing the negotiation

This article operationalizes Saharan et al.'s (2021) model (see Figure 1) to explore the processes surrounding obtaining research access in partnership with an organization. Saharan et al. developed their model to explore which factors shape processes of obtaining and maintaining access to advocacy NGOs in Kenya. They determine these to be the research topic, the internal or external gatekeepers, characteristics of the researcher(s), and the organization under study. As they argue, these factors determine the outcome of fieldwork with NGOs. Aligning with Saharan et al. (2021), the purpose is not only to illuminate successful practices but also challenges faced in the field, thus contributing to a scholarly field that is “real rather than sanitized” (Riese 2019, 13).

This article also presents an addition to the model: research participants. In Saharan et al.'s (2021) article, the objective was to obtain access to NGOs and their staff members, not to the participants in the NGOs' projects. Hence, the intended participants of this case are distinct from those of Saharan et al. (2021), which may explain why ‘participants’ is not

part of their model, but is a central addition here.

By building on Saharan et al.'s (2021) model and adding to their findings, two objectives are aimed for: providing a case-based study which goes beyond a theoretical exploration of research access, as well as including an additional factor which influences access. Both these objectives are called for by Saharan et al. (2021) in order to expand the field of literature on processes of obtaining access in qualitative research. These four factors, along with the additional one, are now explored in relation to this case.

Research topic

As the project to which I had requested access dealt with gender-based violence, the research naturally required sensitivity. Whether a topic is regarded as sensitive depends on context and cultural norms, as Miller et al. (2022) state, yet it is commonly deemed so when the topic is considered private, stressful, or sacred. Although the intended interviews did not examine experiences of violence, but rather explored participants' experiences of being part of an anti-GBV project, the frames

surrounding the research were sensitive, and thus complicated the consent process. The challenging project topic generated a sense of needing to step into the field with sensitivity and empathy. Although the participants were merely on the brink of adulthood, it became apparent that some bore personal experiences that had engendered a need to commit themselves to combating GBV. Thus, I was aware that conducting interviews might give rise to difficult emotions or triggering memories. The rapport-building during the internship was intended to generate a safe space for this. Obtaining access and conducting sensitive research is complex, and this is further complicated when the research involves young people, which is explored later.

Besides the project topic, the focus of the intended research also posed a challenge. The research aimed to investigate which aspects of the project the participants found particularly beneficial and which worked less well. Conducting critical research like this may constitute a challenge, as NGOs are embedded in aid chains, making them vulnerable to critical research and thus more wary of approving it. As Saharan et al. (2021) illuminate, in their research in Kenya, researchers experienced considerable unease amongst staff members of NGOs, due to the sensitivity associated with NGO funding and their dependent relationship with donors. As a result, the researchers in their study were often perceived as doing evaluation exercises. Similarly, I experienced that a concern was expressed by the NGO about critical questions that I intended to ask, for instance concerning the learning environment, as I was informed that critical questions could signal that the learning environment was not great. Thus, researchers may be met with scepticism, depending on the nature of their research. Even when NGOs may wish to have critical studies like these undertaken, there is a certain risk associated with this being done by outsiders who might publish adverse results. This could potentially harm relationships with

donors, which in turn could affect project participants.

As numerous arguments were made by the NGO as to why the research would be difficult to permit, it led me to ponder what was truly the foundation of their concerns. Was the research too poor in quality and could it be regarded as harmful? Or contrarily, was there a risk that its quality and insights could potentially generate a debate about the organization's work? As a master's student at the time, it was hard to imagine that the latter was the case, and that a thesis could have any real influence. The research topic and the difficulty of obtaining access generated not only a scrutinization of how to ensure that it was ethical to conduct research on this sensitive topic, but also of my own abilities as a researcher. This refers to the way in which a researcher's ethnographic life is never separable from the self, and how our emotions form the research process (Emerald and Carpenter 2015). In retrospect, I wonder whether I did enough to explore the foundation of the NGO's concerns at the time. Now, I wish I had asked more questions to get to the root. However, at the time, I tried to balance both nudging to speed up the process due to time constraints, whilst also attempting to remain on good terms with the organization to increase my chances of obtaining research access. Arguably, there were multiple reasons for the rejection, and ultimately both the project topic and the nature of the research created barriers for access. This was entangled with the characteristics of the participants.

Research participants

The aspect of research participants constitutes an addition to Saharan et al.'s (2021) model (see Figure 1). Albeit intertwined with the research topic, research participants are presented as a separate factor, since distinct aspects within it, namely age and background, influenced research access. Firstly, the participants were 17 and 18 years of age, and therefore some were

considered minors in the South African legal context. This poses implications for obtaining consent, as children may not be able to legally consent on their own. Thus, consent ought to be obtained from a child's legal guardian, in addition to acquiring assent ensuring the child's willingness to participate (Wasunna et al. 2014). However, in this negotiation process, neither the parents nor the children were informed of the research. I attempted to obtain permission to discuss with the children whether they would be interested in participating, to see if there was a basis for conducting the research. The permission was not granted, as the NGO would first have to make a decision about the research. The interesting question here is, whose consent matters most? Who is best equipped to decide on behalf of children whether they should be allowed to participate in research: parents or NGOs? Needless to say, NGOs working with children have an ethical obligation to safeguard them from ill-equipped researchers (or anyone else) who may cause harm. The centrality of the notion of 'safeguarding' was evident in the NGO's written material used for the training of staff and interns, with a compendium dedicated to safeguarding. Thus, gatekeepers within NGOs have a positive function, since they ensure the protection of children. Yet, at the same time, NGOs possess the power to be moral judges of what we regard as harmful research – and this morality may supersede the moral capacity of the children and their parents in this case. We can argue that this may have been the case in this situation, as neither children nor parents were consulted in the decision-making.

Due to children and youth being regarded as 'vulnerable' and in need of protection, a responsibility is placed on adults to protect them. Therefore, attempts to conduct research with young people often entail negotiating with several layers of gatekeepers (Miller et al. 2022). In fact, making sense of children through a discourse of vulnerability,

and regarding research with children as risky, may position researchers as 'dangerous', thus generating a reluctance to conduct research with children, and a culture of restriction that permeates work with children (Carter 2009; Nutbrown 2011; Miller et al. 2022).

However, abandoning research with young people entirely appears problematic, as children hold unique, contemporary insights into childhood. Hence, in the last couple of decades, efforts to ethically include children in research have been made. Consequently, children and young people's voices are increasingly being heard across various aspects of their lives (Alderson and Morrow 2020; Aldridge 2014). Aldridge (2014) notes that the reason why young people are vulnerable and marginalized in society is due to the lack of their voices in public discourses on childhood. Thus, we are left wondering which one outweighs the other: the need to protect young people in research, or the need to have their voices present in discussions, despite this being ethically challenging? It appears that this encapsulates a question of whether we perceive young research subjects as children to protect, or as young adults with the agency and capacity to make moral judgments for themselves (if approved by their legal guardians). The answer to this question inevitably has cultural nuances.

Secondly, the background of the participants had implications for access. The participants were Black or Coloured⁴ teenagers from township communities. The intersection of being young and being from townships positioned these participants as 'vulnerable', and thus additional sensitivity was required in the research process. However, we may wonder, would these young people necessarily conceptualize themselves as vulnerable? Might the positioning of a group as 'vulnerable' generate a further marginalization rather than the intended protection? This is discussed later, as

⁴ A widely used and official term in South Africa that denotes people of mixed African, Asian, and European ancestry.

we now continue to the next factor influencing research access.

Organizational characteristics

Reflecting on the characteristics of an organization before attempting to cooperate with them on fieldwork may provide indicators of how difficult obtaining access will be. As Saharan et al. (2021) highlight, the researcher in their article who cooperated with an organization with a formalized and professionalized structure had more difficulty obtaining and maintaining access than the two researchers who cooperated with a semi-formalized and an informal organization. The results from my case echo their findings. In the case cited in this article, the NGO has a small number of staff, yet they sometimes operate nationally and internationally, depend heavily on international donors, and have a formalized structure. Additionally, they are accustomed to receiving a great number of international interns and to relying on local volunteers.

The formalized nature of NGOs signifies the phenomenon of NGOs resembling businesses. It is increasingly being claimed that a growing number of NGOs appear “firm-like” (Joachim and Schneiker 2018). This manifests, for instance, through corporatization and marketization. The business nature of NGOs affects access to research, since organizations that operate within the aid chain are forced to consider the consequences that bad exposure may have on future funding, and thus are more inclined to regulate the flow of information to ensure a stable representation (Mosse 2004; Siwale 2015). This fosters an understanding of the intricate web in which NGOs are embedded: creating an image, securing funding, and navigating relationships with donors in an increasingly competitive market. The firm-like phenomenon generates questions concerning how corporate logic affects the competitiveness, credibility, and services of NGOs, and

how it influences relationships with stakeholders (Joachim and Schneiker 2018).

Thus, for organizations with a dependency on both national and international donors, which was the case for this NGO, the stakes may be higher than the reward of allowing researchers access to their organization. Hence, to maximize one’s chances of obtaining access to an organization for research purposes, its gatekeepers must be persuaded of the social value of the study (Singh and Wassenaar 2016).

Gatekeepers

The organization’s formalized structure became apparent when I discussed my research proposal with them. This had to follow a strict chain of command. Firstly, I had to present a proposal to two managers and discuss it with them in depth; at this point the proposed interview guide had to be altered, particularly its critical questions. This step had to be completed before getting permission to present it to the CEO. This permission was not granted, arguably because the negotiation with the managers was prolonged, and potentially also due to their scepticism. As the process extended over time, I was under pressure, since I soon had to depart the country. Therefore, I reached out directly to the CEO via email about my research, but received no response. Hence, the chain of command was obeyed in the NGO, signifying its formalized structure. Experiencing strict hierarchical structures and limited access to formalized NGOs’ decision-making bodies aligns with Saharan et al.’s (2021) findings. Nonetheless, it is understandable why the NGO would be cautious. Being responsible for these young people and pledging to ensure their safeguarding, and not having control over what the data is used for afterwards, may have generated protective measures.

As addressed above, gatekeepers play a central role in regulating the flow of

information and ensuring the survival of an organization. This is particularly the case when researchers aim to conduct critical research. Gatekeepers play a determining role in outlining the conditions of entry into an organization; access to data and participants, and restriction or control over the scope of data and the analysis thereof (Singh and Wassenaar 2016). Researchers must be prepared to argue with gatekeepers about the potential benefits of their critical research and outline their commitment to constructive recommendations which may help to improve the organization (Singh and Wassenaar 2016). This requires social skills and professional integrity, which is worth reflecting on for budding researchers, who may find negotiating with established organizations overwhelming if unprepared.

Researchers, especially abroad, may grow desperate under time constraints while awaiting their research proposal outcomes (see Pollard 2009; Punch 2012; Berckmoes 2013). I encountered this desperation, and as a result contemplated the implications of directly asking the children and their parents whether they wished to participate. This was due to time constraints, but was also a result of feeling regulated; I had regular interactions with the participants, yet what I discussed with them had restrictions. Although there may be no legal constraints to this direct approach of circumventing gatekeepers, researchers must ask themselves: Does this constitute ethical research? And how much is my research worth? Is it worth creating enemies over and potentially putting children and parents in a compromised position? Clearly, it was not. Additionally, it may be difficult for community outsiders to comprehend the vital role that gatekeepers can play. As Appiah (2021) argues, gatekeepers have a central responsibility in protecting community members from deception and exploitation. Therefore, attempts to circumvent cultural customs, such as community chiefs or elders, who function

as gatekeepers to research participants, equate to “ethics dumping” (Appiah 2021), since community members’ values and practices are deemed inferior to researchers’ interests. This has ethical implications, compromising the integrity of both the research process and the researcher. This case further complexifies Appiah’s (2021) reflections, since neither the gatekeeping organization nor the researcher was a natural part of the township communities; the organization’s management was socioeconomically, racially, and spatially different, and so was I, as a White, Western woman. Hence, we both had our own separate interests, which may have differed from those of the community. Thus, it might have been beneficial if community members had been consulted regarding the research. Despite the NGO and its gatekeepers being outside of the community, we may still apply Appiah’s (2021) framework, since the NGO works closely with community members to run its projects. Therefore, the NGO may possess a deeper understanding of the importance of gatekeeping to the community, although this was not mentioned by the NGO in the negotiations.

As an inexperienced researcher with limited influence, and with no institutional representative present to argue my case,⁵ I felt poorly equipped for the negotiation with the organization, and my options appeared limited. This feeling constitutes the imperative behind the article and symbolizes the need for researchers to share their experiences from the field, as many of us are unprepared for what we encounter (see Siwale 2015; Pritchard 2018; Medeiros 2020). This is particularly necessary when our experiences are unsuccessful and entail messiness and alterations to our plan, as these constitute lessons to be learned – for ourselves and others. Field access depends not

⁵ I felt that having institutional support present to argue my case might have helped the negotiation process; however, it is uncertain whether this would have made a difference, as it was merely my own wish and was not mentioned by the NGO.

only on gatekeepers but also on researchers' identities and choices.

Researcher positionality

As Saharan et al. (2021) state, negotiating for access to an organization goes beyond simply gaining access to a research site; it also depends on the relationship between the researcher and the participants. In the initial phase of planning this research, questions arose: How can I establish a meaningful connection to these participants? What elements may enhance rapport-building? Can I justify my presence as a researcher, when I appear to differ significantly from my field of interest? In this case, the field was comprised of Black and Coloured South African youth from townships, who may commonly be referred to as situated on the margins. What qualifies me, as a privileged European, to inquire about their lives? Do I possess an adequate understanding of the circumstances that these young people are growing up under, to be able to understand the nuances of the interview data?

Beginning the research process with a six-month internship with the NGO appeared to be the ideal opportunity to build trust and credibility. This allowed my presence to gradually become normalized and provided opportunities to connect with the participants. My positionalities as White, Western, and woman constituted an initial distance between us. This immediately perceived difference was also questioned by some participants, who were eager to examine my understanding of their context and country during our first encounter. Thus, my awareness of my own positionalities was beneficial, as their questioning was not unexpected. It is however noteworthy that being an outsider was not solely a stumbling block; it also prompted conversation. Having previously spent a few years in South Africa, establishing local connections, gaining insights into the cultures, and knowing bits of the languages, I felt secure in their

questioning. I was asked about isiXhosa (some participants' mother tongue), and if I had ever been to a township. Their curiosity about my understanding appeared beneficial for the rapport-building, as the surprise of my familiarity with their context established a sense of common ground and became a catalyst for further communication. The question I had asked myself about "how can I justify my presence here?" appeared to have been pondered by the participants themselves. This seemed to break down some initial barriers – whilst it is necessary to acknowledge that racial and socioeconomic differences cannot simply be bridged to the extent that they cease to matter, my privileged position was inevitably always at play. Hence, positionality is made up of identity markers which one cannot change (see for instance Pritchard 2018, regarding the role that one's nationality plays, and Reyes 2020, on using race as an ethnographic tool), but it is also constituted by the choices one makes in the field, which may help circumvent the initial barriers constructed by our apparent identities.

The established commonalities arguably engendered a sense of trust, and enabled participants to share thoughts and concerns with me as a mentor. However, the established connection between the researcher and the participants had its own implications. In contexts where researcher and participants hold different levels of power, as in this case of mentor and mentees, there is a risk that participants may not feel that they can freely decline or withdraw from a study, despite being informed of this right, due to the differential power of the roles. This is similar to learners experiencing difficulties with declining or withdrawing from research organized by teachers (Singh and Wassenaar 2016). These intricate power dynamics are further intensified when a researcher is part of the organization that is being researched; when participants are recruited by someone known to them, it can compromise the voluntariness of participating

in the research, thereby undermining the voluntary dimension of informed consent (Singh and Wassenaar 2016).

Attempting to conduct fieldwork within an NGO that one has worked as part of involves both benefits and challenges. Initially, I assumed that it would be an advantage having been part of the NGO, due to the rapport-building, which would ensure a more comfortable, ethical data collection and probably higher quality data. However, it became clear that my involvement with the NGO positioned me rather ambiguously, not as an insider but neither entirely as an outsider. As I intended to interview participants who had regarded me as part of staff for six months, arguing that the research was conducted solely for my master's thesis and had no involvement with the NGO might have been tricky to cement, especially when the NGO wished to oversee the interviews (as interns and volunteers were not allowed to be alone with the participants), thereby potentially restricting participants from voicing critical comments. Contrarily, I wondered if the participants' familiarity with me might have posed a concern for the NGO – would the participants potentially feel comfortable to the extent that critical opinions about the project could easily be voiced, thus potentially compromising the organization's reputation and future funding?

Negotiating for access with an organization and its gatekeepers is complexified by this ambiguous insider/outsider positionality (see Cui 2015; Adu-Ampong and Adams 2020; Bukamal 2022). Whilst I assumed that the organization's familiarity with me would engender a sense of trust in my research, it also generated increased complications. My naivety led me to assume that reciprocity would play a part; that after an unpaid internship, the 'favour' would be returned, and research permitted. However, I was unfamiliar with the formalities that surround obtaining access. As Singh and Wassenaar (2016) point out, there is both a formal and informal process

of gaining access. The formal one requires an understanding of an organization's operational hierarchy and rules concerning professional etiquette, whereas the informal one requires the researcher to adopt an objective and formal stance with regard to the research process, even if they are known to gatekeepers and participants. These processes are part of the broader culture; both formal and informal practices and behaviours are shaped by their specific local context (Miller et al. 2022). Maintaining an objective and formal stance in the negotiation process is challenging in praxis, when factors such as deadlines, personal relations, and the need for data for their research subject the researcher to pressure, which they also need to navigate.

I naively assumed I would be granted certain 'insider' advantages in the form of access, partly due to the rapport-building. However, the established rapport was between me, participants, and staff, but not necessarily between me and the decision-makers: the management of the NGO. Thus, I assumed that familiarity with the people in the organization would facilitate access, and thereby underestimated the fact that, regardless of familiarity, official processes and protocols would remain in effect. As Miller et al. (2022, 215) bring to our attention, "having a knowledge of a country and the institutions therein, or being located in a country should not be equated to having knowledge of the processes, practices and behaviours (culture) of the country itself – as far as access and gatekeeping issues are concerned." In retrospect, this was a lesson on expectation management: the responsibility of the researcher to communicate the specificities of their research and inquire about the protocols of the organization. Moreover, the experience emphasized the messy entanglement of emotions and professionalism: the emotional investment that one may feel after spending time on a project and with its participants, to then have one's research plans go up in smoke. It became a lesson about acknowledging the

investment one has in one's research, and how it can lead to both great excitement and frustration. It was a lesson about the fragility of researchers, about experiencing broken trust and failed expectations of reciprocity.

It is likely that I remained more of an outsider than I thought, perhaps due to my unfamiliarity with the negotiation process, or due to the identities that I inhabit. This can be further complexified by one's Western affiliations; Saharan et al. (2021) point out how affiliation with European universities or donor agencies can be a stumbling block to access. In this case, being a White European researcher in an African context is a rather ambiguous position; it is a position of privilege, but simultaneously of vulnerability, as "merely" a student embedded in larger Global North/South power dynamics. For White Western researchers conducting fieldwork in the Global South, it appears essential to reflect on the history which one represents in the field, and what kinds of traumas and mistrust one may evoke with one's national and racial identity. Hence, it is imperative to acquire knowledge of the given country's history and its historico-political entanglement with other nations, to reflect on the scepticism that one's outsider positionality may evoke.

When operating in contexts that differ from our own, a large part of our unpreparedness is tied to our assumptions about the world, which we carry with us into the field. As researchers, we hold our own views on what constitutes ethical research and how participants may best be protected. Yet it is plausible that we will encounter opinions and approaches in the field that challenge those of our own.

When moralities clash: The question of protecting 'vulnerable' participants

It is most often the case that organizations and researchers alike are interested in ensuring that the rights of participants are upheld.

However, there may be varying opinions on how that should manifest in praxis. The case in this article raises a question: Which fundamental beliefs are at play when organizations gatekeep consent?

To help answer this question, we turn to Segalo and Molobela (2019), who unravel their attempts to conduct research on sociocultural constructions around the practice of abortion amongst women in a rural South African community. Apart from obtaining individual consent from the participants, consent had to be ensured from the gatekeepers of the community: individuals elected as leaders by the community. However, their research was deemed problematic by a research ethics committee, since the population of the study were regarded as vulnerable, the topic as sensitive, and the gatekeeping process as questionable. Their article has similarities with this case. The intersecting factors which we have previously unravelled – being young, from a marginalized background, and part of a sensitive project – appear to position participants in a vulnerable group in need of protection, particularly when the said project is run by an organization that holds an ethical responsibility to safeguard its participants; indeed, a discourse of 'safeguarding children' was central to the organization's work. This generated a sense that, first and foremost, these participants are regarded as children to protect. Yet would these participants regard themselves as in need of protection? Would they conceptualize themselves as vulnerable?

What in fact constitutes being 'vulnerable'? Groups which are commonly deemed vulnerable include children, the elderly, people with physical, cognitive, or intellectual impairment, people who experience physical or mental illnesses, LGBTQIA+ people, drug users, the homeless, prisoners, refugees, ethnic minorities, or any individuals who are regarded as stigmatized or marginalized (Allen 2002; Alexander et al. 2018). However, this conceptualization may itself need to be

scrutinized. As Molobela (2017) points out, the classification of populations as vulnerable is problematic, since it is rooted in Euro-Western biomedical traditions, and thus not necessarily universally applicable. Hence, vulnerability becomes framed within notions of poverty, class status, and gender; areas that require sensitivity, through a Western lens. But as Molobela (2017) argues, such aspects do not necessarily situate one as 'vulnerable' in a Global South context; rather, it is part of the norm that people's lives are constituted along such axes of inequality.

When we, as either researchers or organizations, work with these assumed vulnerable groups, we typically aspire to be benevolent in our approach. But as noted by Orb et al. (2001) in their seminal paper, one of the core ethical principles of research, beneficence, may sometimes be taken to the extreme and materialize as paternalism. To apply the concept of paternalism to this case would entail researching an anti-GBV project for the youth, and exploring which elements work well and which could be enhanced, but then deciding not to include the participants of the project in the study, due to the sensitive topic and their vulnerability. Thus, a paternalistic approach does not provide the said group the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they want to participate, nor does it allow their experiences to be heard – ultimately restricting people's freedom of choice (Orb et al. 2001; Von Benzon and Van Blerk 2017). Fundamentally, paternalism encapsulates a question of which holds the greatest weight: safeguarding or individual rights. To return to the case of Segalo and Molobela (2019), they illuminate how positioning a group as vulnerable, and research with them as sensitive, is complex, as it strips participants of their agency and assumes that they are incapable of making decisions for themselves. In sum, deeming someone to be 'vulnerable' silences them, and restricts their voice from being heard. These reflections are noteworthy for the case in this article.

At the root of this case is a moral clash between a researcher and an organization. The interesting part of the clash is that both share the same objective: to protect participants. However, their conceptualizations of this differ. Essentially, the organization is ethically committed to safeguarding its participants from ill intents. This is additionally entangled with ensuring a good organizational reputation and future funding. For the researcher, however, her conceptualization of protecting participants entails empowering them, allowing their voices to be heard, particularly when these voices are not often heard. The researcher is furthermore committed to protecting participants' autonomy, as well as to conducting ethical research. Therefore, the negotiation for access between researcher and organization is difficult, and in this case unsuccessful, because they share the same moral obligation, but conceptualize it differently. It becomes a question of either safeguarding or empowering participants.

However, there is a risk of merely regarding this case through a Western ethical lens, where individual rights are centred, and gatekeepers' cultural role may not be fully understood. We cannot disregard the communal nature of decision-making that gatekeepers ensure, with the aim of preventing continued exploitation of communities of the Global South. Whilst some scholars argue that such natural boundaries to participants ought to be respected, since they form social structures that may be hard for outsiders to understand (Appiah 2021), other scholars stress that although well-intended, gatekeepers' actions "are not only paternalistic, they could be further marginalising vulnerable populations by denying them the benefits to be gained from research designed to identify and begin addressing their needs" (Alexander et al. 2018, 2). As Segalo and Molobela (2019) stress in their case, it is problematic when rural women are denied the opportunity to contribute to knowledge production that is centred around

their lives, since it keeps them silenced and situated on the periphery. Additionally, research ethics committees, organizations, and gatekeepers must be open to the possibility that rural people (or other 'vulnerable' groups) may not regard themselves as vulnerable (Segalo and Molobela 2019). A perception of research participants as vulnerable arguably shapes the research process, and tailors the focus in ways that may not initially have been intended.

The aspect of gatekeeping in this case is further complexified by the web of gatekeepers that unfolds when working with people who are legally considered minors. It generates the question of who are the rightful, primary gatekeepers of these young people, who are participating in an organization's project? This question is particularly intricate in this case, where the organization that operated as their primary protector was not a community-based organization. Thus, if it had been accessible, how would consultation with these young people and their communities have affected the negotiation process? Who can best ensure that participants' best interests are met? And is a consent model which incorporates participants, guardians, and the organization feasible?

It appears that in addition to Western ethical frameworks, which are based on an individual rights-based approach, we also need conceptualizations that can grasp the intricate gatekeeper relations that researchers encounter in the Global South. While Western understandings should not be abandoned, they may not be fully equipped to make sense of the ethical challenges researchers face in the field. Hence, scholars have argued for the need to move towards an African ethical framework which acknowledges the multiplicity of ways to understand the world – and is built on values such as community, morality, solidarity, and justice. Essentially, this call for African ethics signifies an attempt to recognize one's own ethical standpoint with humility and avoid imposing ethical principles in contexts where

they may not be relevant to people (Onuoha 2007; Fayemi and Macaulay-Adeyelu 2016; Segalo and Molobela 2019).

Conclusion

This article has explored which factors play a role in determining research access, namely research topic, participants, organizational characteristics, gatekeepers, and researcher positionality. The case in this article has highlighted that when several of these aspects entail ethical challenges or may be deemed sensitive or vulnerable, researchers are likely to encounter difficulties in obtaining access. Cases like this, of sensitivity and vulnerability, also beg the question: who has the right to consent?

The exploration of these factors aims to expand the scholarly field of researchers recognizing their unpreparedness for their experiences in the field, as well as the negotiations they find themselves in (see Ballamingie and Johnson 2011; Palmer et al. 2014; Brasher 2020; Medeiros 2020). Empirical accounts from the field are the closest we can come to preparing other researchers for what they may encounter. If we expose the messiness, alterations, reflections, and frustrations that are part of research, it can provide grounds for learning from each other's challenges and mistakes.

In addition to the aforementioned factors, negotiating for access requires an investigation of the different moralities that are at play and acquiring an understanding of the separate interests and commitments that researchers and organizations have (Maunganidze 2019). Moreover, negotiations require plenty of time, patience, professional integrity, intercultural social skills, and preparedness to alter one's initial plan. Negotiations in themselves, especially those that are unsuccessful, entail extensive learning. When researchers are left without any data collected, they are forced to ask themselves "what counts as data?" By being forced to be creative, researchers may create something from nothing. An essential

takeaway from this article is the importance of documenting every step of one's journey. An internship journal, which you once did not regard as data, may eventually form the cornerstone of your thesis. That is part of how I ended up with a successful, albeit very different, thesis without any intentional data collected.

Achieving informed consent is not merely a matter to be negotiated between researchers and participants; other actors also play a pivotal role. At the same time, achieving informed consent is not only a research matter; negotiating about consent affects our studies, our jobs, and our careers – as these often depend on such negotiations coming to fruition. Thus, we as scholars need empirical works to learn from, particularly on those negotiations that were unsuccessful.

This article aligns itself with other scholars who call for African ethics or decolonizing ethics (Onuoha 2007; Fayemi and Macaulay-Adeyelu 2016; Segalo and Molobela 2019), as current Western ethical frameworks may not fully equip researchers to enter the field in the Global South. African ethics encapsulate different understandings of the world and different

morality, thereby nurturing an understanding of community relations and gatekeeper roles. A framework of African ethics may be more useful to approach the entanglement of consent in this case, where consent was not negotiated with participants, nor with community members, but rather with an organization which differed contextually from both the participants and the community. Perhaps a model that goes beyond individual-based consent can assist with how to approach consent, in cases like this where consent has three actors: underage participants, their guardians from the community, and an organization. Whilst acknowledging gatekeepers' importance and responsibilities, it is worth reflecting on the consequences when voices from the periphery are silenced on matters that concern their lives. If possible, it may be advantageous for researchers to inquire about the extent to which 'vulnerable' participants prioritize having their voices heard when weighing out the risks and benefits of them engaging in research. Perhaps then researchers can be better equipped for the tricky task of balancing the protection and empowerment of participants.

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