

METHODS BRIEFING 19

Developing Methodological Strategies to recruit and research socially excluded groups

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Background

Socially excluded individuals and groups are difficult to recruit into research studies. Even where studies are explicitly designed to seek the experiences, opinions, and values of socially excluded individuals and groups, researchers frequently recruit the most accessible and more articulate members of low-income communities, for example, members of activist and community groups. We sought to use innovative methods to access those individuals and groups whom we knew from previous research experience were difficult to reach. We sought to better understand the most appropriate ways of recruiting socially excluded people to research and, at the same time, consider the perceptions about the nature of social exclusion among those we accessed.

Key methodological results

Perceptions of social exclusion held by respondents

The low-income estate in which we conducted this research may be characterised as socially excluded. Those that live on the estate are more likely to be unemployed, have no educational qualifications, be in receipt of benefits and live in social housing

than for the city and region as a whole. Rates of drug addiction, teenage pregnancy and crime are above the city average.

However, such measures of social exclusion tell us little about the experience of social exclusion. Insights into the social networks of socially excluded individuals and groups, the size of these networks, and what these social networks are used for are important in understanding the dynamics and trajectories of social exclusion.

Participants described networks along a continuum from 'big' to 'small'. Big networks include family, home, and relationships with important others in the community. These networks are important to (often informal) economic activity and in accessing services such as health and social care, probation services and housing. In contrast, those with small networks describe themselves as 'keeping to themselves', neither moving about socially nor geographically, with limited resources for accessing services.

Powerlessness and constrained powerfulness are important concepts in understanding how these networks are used. Powerlessness is expressed as an inability to effect change in life circumstances through direct mediation with (most often) statutory agencies, such as schools, health services and local authority.

However, in some circumstances, individuals are able to exert constrained powerfulness in relation to service providers to effect change. Constrained powerfulness may be through direct action. For example, a mother, after months of ignored requests to the council for window locks, visited the Rent Office and placed her child, who had been injured from a fall from an unlocked, upstairs window, on the

office counter and repeated her demand for window locks. Her house was fitted with window locks the next day.

Most often change is effected through the direct mediation of a professional. We found examples of health workers, drug workers, and voluntary workers who, in addition to carrying out a particular role, also address other needs. These include rubbish clearance, trips, repairs, transport provision, pregnancy testing, support in interactions with health and social care providers, and assistance with form filling. Box 1 is a transcript typical of the many examples we found where the mediation of a professional was important in effecting change in a family's life.

Box 1: Profoundly constrained powerfulness – washing children in the twin-tub washing machine

They (the Public Health Department) used to do tests, because of the old lead piping (AS: right)... , so they (the children) kept having tests for that done, and, err, I eventually got all the lead piping in the house replaced with this plastic stuff, but still get doctors coming. A head doctor (neurologist) or somebody came out to talk to us, and I thought "oh bugger it, I'll tell him".

So I'd had no hot water for two to three months, no hot water, and I'd already reported it, and I said "well could you have a word with council". And he's gone "why?" "Well" I said "I've had no hot water". He said "how long for?". (I) said "don't know, about 12 weeks, sommat like that". He's gone "well how do you bath your kids?" Well I had an old twin tub then with a heater on it so you take the bloody agitator out and, I showed it, I filled it up with cold water and I put the heater on and I warmed the water up and that's how. I strip washed my kids, in me washing machine, I said they don't have to turn it on, but that's how I washed me kids for nearly three months...

But within 24 hours of him contacting the rent office I had a new gas water heater and I thought that was not very nice. Why did they have to wait for somebody else to do it when I needed it myself, when I'd already been up and complained about it umpteen times? (S:22)

Methods of accessing socially excluded individuals and groups

Service providers and researchers access hard-to-reach groups using a range of methods. These include innovative service delivery, peer interviewers, incentives, involvement and immersion in communities, and acts of reciprocity. These methods are used to enhance credibility, build rapport, and break down power relationships and so facilitate access. Both service providers and researchers frequently mention the importance of building trustful relationships as important in accessing hard-to-reach groups.

We investigated the kinds of relationships through which access may be denied or granted so we could better understand the nature of trustful relationships for access.

In this investigation we sought access through gatekeepers. We characterised our 39 gatekeepers as falling into three groups;

formal gatekeepers who work for statutory agencies with a remit to control or supervise the socially excluded and who have limited community involvement;

comprehensive gatekeepers who implement comprehensive services to address the health and social care needs of the population and have longstanding relationships with the community;

informal gatekeepers who use their own resources to address the needs of those they live among through befriending, supporting and protecting them.

A typology of the key features of the gatekeepers—a continuum from formal to informal

Formal gatekeepers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• work with socially excluded people to achieve a particular end, to control, supervise and rehabilitate.• implement statutory measures to address social exclusion.• work in multi-disciplinary teams, much of this multi-disciplinarity concerns enforcement.• have limited community involvement.• have relationships with socially excluded that are vertical with power held by gatekeeper.
Comprehensive gatekeepers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• have a specific remit to address health and social care in the population.• in addition to delivering specific services, implement more comprehensive services, including innovative service delivery and see their role as including wide-ranging referral across service provision.• invariably have long-standing relationships with individuals and groups on the estate, often spanning generations.
Informal gatekeepers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• have limited links to service providers and no mechanisms for referral.• use own resources to address the needs of those they work with in a relationship which is an end in itself.• live and work in the community.• relationship with socially excluded people is one of befriending, supporting, and protecting those that they see as vulnerable and frequently misunderstood (by service providers) in the community.

We did not gain access through *formal gatekeepers*. These formal gatekeepers are considered risky and are distrusted by the socially excluded individuals and groups we were trying to access.

We did not gain access through the *informal gatekeepers*. These gatekeepers make assessments of the risks of allowing researchers access based on experiences of powerlessness and mediate these experiences to those who are socially excluded. In protecting those they see as vulnerable and marginalised, informal gatekeepers frequently reinforce the small dense networks of social exclusion.

We gained access through *comprehensive gatekeepers*. These comprehensive gatekeepers carry out a particular role and deliver a particular service. In addition, they seek to address other issues in the lives of those they work with. Through this fringe work, comprehensive gatekeepers build up long-term relationships, often over several generations. Comprehensive gatekeepers are trusted. It is through their referral in this relationship of trust that researchers may gain access.

Trust is important to understand access to socially excluded individuals and groups. In building trustful relationships we evaluate what we know, what we learn from others, and what

we experience to assess if someone is trustworthy. This evaluation requires that we make an assessment of risk associated with trusting someone. For socially excluded people, with small and dense networks and frequent experiences of powerlessness, the familiar that can be trusted is described within narrow boundaries.

These limits to trust mean that access to socially excluded individuals and groups will always be extremely difficult, time consuming, and resource intensive. Researchers can, however, increase the likelihood of access through trusted comprehensive gatekeepers who have spent considerable time addressing the day-to-day needs of socially excluded individuals and groups they wish to access.

Selected publications

Emmel ND, Hughes K, Greenhalgh J & Sales A (2007) Accessing socially excluded people—trust and the gatekeeper in the researcher-participant relationship. *Sociological Research Online* 12(2) March

Emmel ND, Hughes K, & Greenhalgh J. “*Methodological strategies for accessing socially excluded people*” <http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/events/docs/20061214-emmel-accessing-excluded-people.pdf>

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