


# Negotiations and Research Bargains: Bending Professional Norms in the Effort to Gain Field Access

*International Journal of Qualitative Methods*  
Volume 17: 1–11  
© The Author(s) 2018  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1609406918770033  
journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq  


Rantatalo Oscar<sup>1</sup>, Lindberg Ola<sup>2</sup> , Kihlberg Robert<sup>3</sup>, and Hällgren Markus<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

The present study provides an autoethnographic account of the efforts to gain field access to a police organization, spanning more than 2 years. The aim is to describe a case of gaining access in relation to the professional norms of science put forward by Robert K. Merton. Aided by an organized record of notes, e-mails, and other written communications regarding access (144 memos of various types), the study describes and discusses the negotiations with Mertonian norms that followed from the dissonance between ideals of research and practical reality. Opening up for further scholarly discussion, this article concludes that Merton's norms are incongruent with both prevailing guidelines of research ethics and with the practical, short-term problems of access negotiations and research bargains.

## Keywords

field access, ethnography, police, Robert Merton, qualitative research

## What Is Already Known?

Obtaining field access in organizations is an increasing problem for qualitative researchers. The literature on gaining access is providing strategies that researchers can use, as well as problematizing the ethical issues involved when bargaining with organizations. However, the literature has not hitherto engaged with the problem of how access negotiations affect the types of research questions asked, the way results are presented, and, consequently, what the role of research in society ought to be.

## What This Paper Adds?

Using Merton's norms of science (universalism, communalism, disinterestedness, and organized skepticism) as a reference, this article shows how the realities of research bargaining are at odds with research ideals such as impartiality, rationality, and, in particular, freedom and autonomy from often competing societal interests. It also shows that prevailing ethical guidelines such as "informed consent" might, in the effort to gain access, be problematic in relation to these ideals. With these arguments, this article seeks to expand the debate on the problems of access to organizations to include the role of research in society.

## Introduction

O.L.: <attached photo of key card to the police station with O.L.'s name on it>  
O.L.: Access!! Now you are jealous, huh?  
O.R.: Haha nice!  
M.H.: And a far off expiry date as well. Amazing . . . !  
R.K.: Gnnff, ggotsomethn in my ththroat . . .  
(Excerpt from research group chat channel)

This quote taken from a chat channel in our research team's communications software represents the pinnacle of an 18-month struggle to gain access to a police organization for an ethnographic research project. It also represents the end of months of frustration along with the feelings of the team after so many iterations that it had become impossible to

<sup>1</sup> Police Education Unit, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

<sup>3</sup> Umeå School of Business and Economics, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

## Corresponding Author:

Lindberg Ola, Department of Education, Umeå University, 901 87 Umeå, Sweden.

Email: ola.lindberg@umu.se



remember them all. More importantly, having the key card meant that the agreed 3-year research project for which funding had been available for 6 months could finally start. The aim of this article is to reconstruct and reflect on the experience of gaining this essential access since it offers important insights into the research process, relevant not only for the scholar but also for the society at large.

Problems surrounding access and the frustrations of research bargaining are far from uncommon among scholars, especially when police organizations (see, e.g., Punch, 1986) are involved. The situation, however, surpasses mere frustrations. Scholarly discussions have predominantly addressed access as a researcher problem, discrete event, or an obstacle to overcome (see a critical discussion in Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012). Such discussions provide important insights and are helpful for researchers in gaining access to organizations. However, they shed less light on problems of gaining access as a problem for knowledge production and society in general. This article is concerned with the latter. We do not offer suggestions on strategies for gaining access, but by drawing upon Merton's (1973) normative ideals for science (see also Anderson, Ronning, DeVries, & Martinson, 2010; Macfarlane & Cheng, 2008; Small, 2004), we address the consequences of bargaining for access and how bargaining affects the types of research questions asked, the way results are presented, and, ultimately, what the role of research in society ought to be. We draw upon an autoethnographic critical reflection of the experience of gaining access to a police organization and analyze this experience through Merton's norms. This article aims to contribute to, as well as open up, the debate about what social science and research should aspire to be in relation to our practice as researchers. Hence, our guiding question is what types of compromises with scientific ideals can be identified during the efforts to gain access to a police organization?

### *Access and Research Bargains in Ethnographic Research*

To date, a number of studies in the fields of qualitative research methodology and ethnography have explored issues of field and research access. The bulk of studies on this matter have traditionally been of the generic "tip-giving" type, wherein access is commonly identified as procedural, with "discrete events" being negotiated at the beginning of research projects (see discussions in Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012; Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Elias, 2016; Rowe, 2007). However, an increasing number of studies recognize the processual and relational nature of access negotiations (Carmel, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Taylor & Land, 2014). As stated by Feldman, Bell, and Berger (2003) and Grant (2017), access processes from this perspective can be seen as stretched out in time, unfolding through phases and as such are continuous, dynamic, unstable, and dependent on social relations between the researchers and the researched. Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016) expand on this matter in their discussion of the micro-political aspects of access negotiation, as they demarcate instrumental, transactional, and relational access as three

types of relationship that range from the formal and the contractual to the personal and which commonly characterize both processes and relations between the subjects involved in a research project.

Similar concepts have been used when describing types of access and levels of field immersion: For instance, Clark (2010) with reference to Cassell (1988) uses the concepts of physical and social access to demarcate the difference between primary access—wherein a researcher is allowed to a site—and more in-depth access to the thoughts and actions of informants in situ. Blix and Wettergren (2015) describe three temporal phases of access; initial access, where the field is explored, trust-building characterized by securing the field, and a third step characterized by breakthroughs. Carmel (2011) discusses formal and social access, while Rowe (2007) mentions preliminary contractual access as opposed to trust-based access to informants. Rowe draws on an ethnographic project conducted within the police and exemplifies how heavy reliance on contractual access can be counterproductive when establishing rapport and trustworthiness with informants because the researcher runs a risk of being interpreted as "planted" (Rowe, 2007, p. 38). What these studies indicate is that a central question concerning the negotiation and maintenance of access concerns prevailing power relations within the research site(s) and the relationships that evolve between researchers and researched.

These types of relationships are often described as regulated through "research bargains" which can be defined as more or less formalized agreements between researchers and participants regarding what both parties can expect from a given cooperation (Horwood & Moon, 2003). Central to how such bargains take form is local micro-politics and more specifically, power symmetries between researchers and representatives or local gatekeepers associated with research sites (Crowhurst, 2013; Crowhurst & Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013; Emmel, Hughes, Greenhalgh, & Sales, 2007). Bell and Bryman (2007) contest that researchers in organizational and management fields are often in a relatively weak position in relation to gatekeepers such as managers and that access to organizations therefore often involves offering deliverables such as the provision of training or feedback in return (see also Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). Other ways that gatekeepers impact research bargains are requirements on research design, control of publication, and limitations to research dissemination (Clark, 2010; Punch, 1986). Research participants and gatekeepers might also impact research through conditions regulating when researchers must "back off" during fieldwork. Any resulting delimited conditional access might be especially problematic in a context of inductive qualitative research (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012; Horwood & Moon, 2003).

In addition to the gatekeeper, the researcher is part of the bargain. More specifically, researchers may engage in deceptive behavior in negotiations to gain access. It has been concluded that in addition to apparent deceptive behaviors (such as covert observations), some level of minor deception is a defining characteristic of access negotiations (Alcadipani &

Hodgson, 2009). For instance, impression management—where researchers manipulatively present themselves in ways that promote accessibility to data—has been described as a form of subtle deception (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016, p. 18). Blix and Wettergren (2015) describe “emotion work,” where researchers strategically display subservient behavior to gain sympathy from research subjects in a way that works in favor of maintaining access. Similar accounts of “rapport management” that takes different forms throughout research projects are well described (see Duncombe & Jessop, 2002). Deception on the part of the researcher has also been discussed in relation to how consent and information are dealt with in research bargains (Punch, 1986). Researchers might consciously practice deception by withholding at least part of their research purposes in order to secure access (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016).

### Research Bargains and Merton’s Norms

A shortcoming in many accounts of research bargains is that little is said about how core research objectives might be contested and transformed over time as field access obstacles are encountered. These types of transformations include secondary negotiations that occur because of the deadlocks produced by limited or conditional access to the field. In such cases, researchers might on the one hand have to negotiate with field representatives and on the other hand negotiate with their own normative ideals of research (Merton, 1973, revisited by many other scholars, e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Macfarlane & Cheng, 2008; Small, 2004).

The ideals are described by Merton as “institutional imperatives” and are comprised of *universalism*, *communalism* (i.e., research should be public knowledge), *disinterestedness* (i.e., impartiality), and *organized skepticism*. Universalism is taken to mean that the claims of scholars should be judged only on their own merits and without regard to whoever is propagating them. This also entails an obligation that scientific institutions provide equal opportunities for anyone wanting to pursue scientific knowledge. Communalism means that research results and knowledge are everyone’s property and should not be kept secret. It is thus the opposite of a view that regards technology as private property. Disinterestedness means that scholars should act for the benefit of the common pursuit of knowledge disregarding personal gain or special interests. Finally, organized skepticism is taken to mean that all scholarly claims should be critically scrutinized and that this scrutiny should be built into the organization of knowledge production (see also Lacey, 2005). The scientific community has several practices echoing and upholding these norms and ideals, such as blind reviews, thesis defenses, equal opportunities for attaining grants, and so on.

While accounts of scientific ideals differ somewhat, they have a common theme of impartiality and rationality as well as, in particular, freedom and autonomy from societal interests that are often competing. However, a solid postmodern critique would suggest that there is no such thing as value-free and impartial science (e.g., Dickens & Fontana, 1994). In the

postmodern account, knowledge is a social construction permeated by subjectivity and power relations. For instance, Gergen and Thatchenkery (2004) criticize rationality and impartiality as part of a modernist view of organizational science. Similarly, Harklau and Norwood (2005, p. 281) state that “scientific objectivity and disinterestedness are not desirable or even possible.” While this criticism is important, we view Merton’s norms as (perhaps unattainable) ideals rather than a description of current practices. One could argue that the norm of disinterestedness is at odds with the key feature of ethnography that commands the researcher to be engaged with and immersed in organizational and other settings. However, ethnography can also be said to have norms of its own, like the discussion on “serendipity” (Rivoal & Salazar, 2013) in which the free pursuit of unexpected findings is seen as a strength of the ethnographic method. The adjustment of research questions to suit the gatekeepers of the organization would in this case counter one of the strengths of ethnographic research. Our view is that Merton’s norms to be “macro” in the sense that they try to encompass all kinds of research. Thus, there is always, in any particular branch of methodology, small discrepancies and things that do not fit the “grand theory” of Merton’s norms. However, we argue that it is important to know that you deviate from a general norm of science and that you can argue why this deviation is defensible. The alternative is that there is no awareness on how your branch of scientific methodology compares to the general mission of scientific knowledge production.

In summary, contemporary studies that are oriented toward methodology have problematized access and described it as processual, relational, and immersed in the power asymmetries that shape research bargains. Research has also identified key stakeholders in research bargains and identified commonly occurring demands and strategies for bargaining. These are important insights into how power dynamics influence access negotiations and key stakeholders in the context of qualitative research. However, we argue there is a lack of debate that goes beyond basic acknowledgments that power influences access bargains. We engage with the question of how such influence may impact not only negotiations between the involved participants but also negotiations within a research project regarding the original ideals and/or objectives of the research. To target how these processes constitute important aspects of the realities and pragmatics of research practice, we turn to a case study that illustrates how field access negotiations may entail oscillation and balancing between conflicting and sometimes incommensurable demands on the researchers involved. In our specific case—a police organization—we describe how access and research bargains led to paradoxes and balancing of demands from the grant provider as well as from the participant organization.

### The Case

In reconstructing and reflecting upon our experiences of gaining access, we took inspiration from an autoethnographic methodological approach in which research teams’ own

experiences and personal narratives describing access negotiations are retrospectively used as primary data to analyze and connect to theory (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Wall, 2008). Following practice in autoethnographic studies (see Duncan, 2004; Holt, 2001), we use available data reports, presentations, e-mails, chats, and memory. In total, the access negotiations lasted more than 2 years with multiple meetings, agreements, contracts, and interactions between those involved, with smaller negotiations still continuing (cf. Feldman et al., 2003). Our guiding principle behind data collection has been to organize these experiences of access negotiation into a meaningful narrative and identify situations that highlight tensions in balancing (Mertonian) norms of research with the practicalities of gaining field access. Particularly, we have sought to identify how the research team adapted to changing demands and also assess what impact the process of bargaining over access had on the original objectives of the research project. Police organizations are viewed as being particularly difficult to gain access to because of their sensitive operations and organizational culture (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). The choice of case serves our aim well since the experiences and the struggles over scientific principles versus reality become obvious.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The first step in the data collection and analysis was to construct a record of the access negotiation process. Here, we used an organized record of notes, e-mails, and other written communications regarding access (144 memos of various types). Three circumstances related to our case contributed significantly to the compilation. First, the project consisted of a team of researchers—being a team allowed us to help each other to remember different details of the narrative. Second, the research team made continuous extensive use of electronically written communication. This communication was partly in the form of e-mail exchanges and partly in the form of team collaboration software with the functionality of cloud-based storage (specifically, “Slack” and “Evernote”<sup>1</sup>). Third, the Police Force is a highly bureaucratic and regulation-based organization (Reiner, 2010) with a penchant for written documents such as agreements, contracts, and declarations (such as declarations of intent and nondisclosure). Taken together, these factors made the access negotiation process retrospectively accessible.

The second step in the process was to build a timeline based on the data that allowed us to identify and fill in voids in the narrative. The timeline included all small events with major events and breakthroughs in access negotiations (see Figure 1). Data points in the timeline are not exhaustive; rather, they are selected from the material compiled in Step 1.

The third step was to conduct an assessment of the access negotiation process described in Steps 1 and 2, specifically using a operationalization of the Mertonian (1973) norms as a guiding framework. The definition of norms that we use is that of Anderson et al. (2010, p. 166) who in their discussion of

Merton (1973) stated that “Norms are collective expectations for and understandings of appropriate and desired behavior within a given social system.” The social system in question can broadly be defined as the scientific community. Merton’s norms, and our operationalizations of them, are:

- *Universalism*—The claims of scholars should be judged only on their own merits, regardless of who the propagating claimant is. Our operationalization included examining the material to look for instances when our *persona* had an impact on the question of access and thus our ability to propagate any claims at all.
- *Communalism*—Results and knowledge from scientific endeavors are everyone’s property and should *not* be kept secret. In this case, we examined the material and noted instances where we had to negotiate with the police concerning the right to publish our material and also instances when they expressed wish to control what we were writing and what was to be made public knowledge.
- *Disinterestedness*—Scholars should act for the benefit of the pursuit of knowledge, disregarding personal gain or special interests that impinge on the research. Our operationalization includes how power over access, funding, or other material arrangements central to the project influence the research per se. In this respect, our access negotiation includes issues such as the question of who decides what empirical areas research are relevant, how the research objectives should be formulated, and what the research problem should be.
- *Organized skepticism*—Scholarly claims should be critically scrutinized. This scrutiny should be built in to the organization of knowledge production. This norm was not particularly relevant to the access negotiation except on the question of how results should be presented. The police’s interest in controlling the output of our work had more bearing on the norm communalism.

This analysis of norms can best be described as an abductive approach (Peirce, 1955) to the interpretation of data, as it entailed oscillation between data and theory in order to translate experiences and connect them to norms. Specifically, the analysis focused on concepts (norms) to explain observations and observations to further develop concepts. The end result of Step 3 was the description of illustrative and theoretically explanatory situations, happenings, or turns of events that were assessed to have theoretical value and significant impact on the trajectory of access negotiations (Ellis et al., 2011). This included an in-depth analysis of situations that contained dilemmas or norm conflict where access was at stake on the one hand and scientific ethical standards on the other.

### Findings

Originally, the project aimed to investigate how personnel within the Swedish police construct and give meaning to a

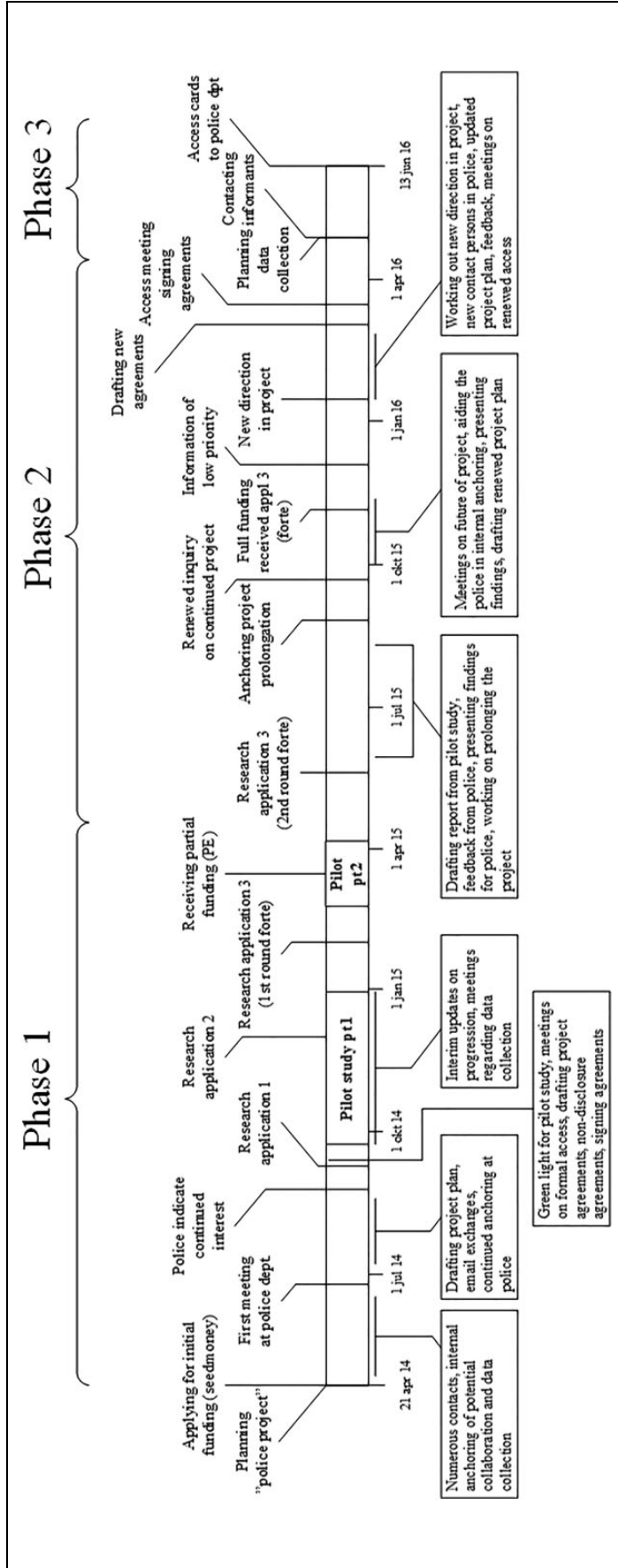


Figure 1. Timeline for gaining access.

substantial ongoing reorganization. Similar to other ongoing reforms of police agencies in Europe, the police was to be centralized organizationally while also having the ambition of increasing professionalism locally (Fyfe, Terpstra, & Tops, 2013). Our project thus targeted a strategic change that represented one of the largest reorganizations of a government agency in Sweden and which was expected to have extensive economical, organizational, and geographical consequences in a function with pronounced societal importance. The project was based on ethnographic methods, and the original plan was to use “shadowing” techniques (see Czarniawska, 2007) and follow police practitioners in their daily activities. The expected contributions of the study were to build knowledge about sense-making (cf. Weick, 1995) of police professionalism in a changing work environment and how skills requirements (among all staff) were changing due to an organizational transformation. In arranging our data, we have identified three primary phases (see Figure 1). For each phase, we detail ethical dissonances pertaining to access negotiations.

### *Phase 1: Project “Bootstrapping” and Negotiating Formal Access*

The initial phase of access negotiations lasted for approximately 1 year ranging from the first project plans (see timeline around April 21, 2014) to the completion of a pilot study in the police (timeline around April 1, 2015). The first phase was characterized by a lack of funding, so work concentrated on the police and funding agencies to get a project going. Thus, the research group had an initial research idea, but there were no material resources to fulfill it besides spare time and a modest research allowance shared among the three principal researchers that competed with funded activities.

The access negotiations with the police regarding the request to conduct research were extensive. They included drafting various versions of project plans and aiding the police contact persons to anchor the project internally. The negotiations were characterized by highly formalized iterations and included several procedures surrounding security clearances. One example was that the research group gave the police consent to screen the personal records of each researcher in order to ensure that no one had a criminal record. Other examples of formal procedures were the regular discussing, drafting, and signing of nondisclosure agreements; agreements regarding research outputs; and contracts about time frames, amplitude, and objectives. In these negotiations, the research team gave the police partial control over output by defining this as a form of “informant validation” of findings. While these concessions are not optimal (see Punch, 1986), they are nonetheless requirements that can hardly be overlooked when trying to undertake research in organizations surrounded by secrecy, such as the police.

From the perspective of the research team, the procedures were important to get the research started. An initial objective was to initiate a pilot project, wherein a small study could foreground applications and help scale a potentially larger

project. Thus, the pilot project would serve dual purposes: It introduced us and our way of working to the police, and it provided us with material that could be used for a possible later extensive research application. Several applications were submitted (see timeline). After about 6 months, the police eventually agreed on a pilot project (see timeline around October 1, 2014) and allowed us access for observations and interviews in a working group and some surrounding organizational constituents. This pilot was conducted with data collection in two instances (see timeline around October 1, 2014–April 1, 2015). In an effort to maintain access and in hopes of building on confidence, the pilot was executed “as if” there had been proper funding for the activities. The observations and interviews greatly surpassed the research allowance of the researchers. Borrowing a metaphor from innovation—the research team worked in a “bootstrapping” manner to initiate the project so as not to lose formal access due to missing funding.

When Phase 1 of our access negotiation process is viewed through a lens of Mertonian norms, we can identify three conflicts, where access and ethics are in opposition. Specifically, we identify access conflicts related to the norms of “universalism” and “communalism.” Conflicts with the norm of universalism concerned the fact that we had to allow personal screenings that assessed suitability for access, thus letting the police decide who could do the research. While the logic of this action (checking for previous convictions and identifying potential security risks) is understandable, it is nonetheless in conflict with the norm of universalism. The norm “communalism” was partially violated by our agreeing to hand over partial control over output to the police. The formalization of this reservation materialized through procedures where agreements and contracts were signed. These procedures were ultimately motivated by the fact that the police, in order to grant us access, wanted some control over what kind of image of their organization might result from our research project.

### *Phase 2: Received Funding and Reduced Access*

Based on earlier conversations with the police about scaling the pilot project, the research team developed and submitted several applications to various funding bodies. At the time of writing these applications, the project had momentum and initial promise of future access through the established contacts, something that was also promoted as a “feasibility” argument in applications. Around the end of the pilot (timeline March 1, 2015), the first wave of partial funding was received. This initial partial funding was enough to keep the project going, albeit in a limited way. The significant change was that a year after initiating the discussion, the project had resources devoted to it for the first time. Honoring the contract with the police about the pilot project, a report was drafted, and the research group provided feedback through a presentation for upper management based on the first step of research. Reporting our partial findings was the price to pay for access on one hand and also sensitized our tentative findings to the thoughts of the police representatives on the other hand.

After this phase of structured feedback (see timeline around July 1, 2015), the project started to lose momentum, as there were no further activities beyond feedback and presenting previous findings for the police. Ironically, this was also the point in time when the project received prestigious full funding from a national research council—FORTE (timeline October 1, 2015). Given this change, the work came to focus on finding a way to prolong the project with the police, as there was funding available for a 3-year project. Here, the research group worked with its contacts within the police in order to raise interest and enable a continuing collaboration. As a result of the organizational changes in the police service, collaboration for the project would require approval by the head of the national police. However, the project was not successful in gaining approval, and around the end of the year, the research team was notified that the police had given the project low priority (see timeline around December 1, 2015).

Facing the threat of a shutdown of access for the whole project, we were forced to choose between returning our research funding and informing the research council that we could not get our project on its feet or work with the police in changing the focus of our research to something that the police felt would be more directly beneficial to their organization. The conversations leading up to a meeting can be viewed in the timeline (January 1, 2016–April 1, 2016). During this period, a possible way forward appeared when the police expressed that they could grant access if they were given a slightly different approach for the project. The pivotal meeting for continued access took place at the police station on January 15, 2016. We came to the meeting room quite proud of our 3-year research grant (an approval rate of about 7% of submitted grants) and ready to convince the police leaders to sign a new agreement providing us access. However, we met a noticeably concerned former police chief. This person had previously granted us permission to do the pilot and had been positive about its continuation, but now, in the new organization, he had been given other responsibilities and his hands were virtually tied by new demands and new leadership responsibilities. His concern showed when he introduced us. He commended our efforts to secure grants but finally conceded that in its current form our project was impossible, given the strains of the newly launched reorganization. The police now wanted two major things: to develop team-based work in investigations and to start evidence-based working. We were asked: “Is there a possibility of doing something along these lines? Otherwise, we cannot stress the staff any more by letting you in” (Notes from meeting, January 15, 2016).

With no time to confer or work out a different plan, we listened to the new directions for developing the police organization and offered suggestions on how we could help. We started to “think aloud,” each trying to add to a revised version of our initial objective of the research project (which was to investigate how personnel within the Swedish police construct and give meaning to a substantial ongoing reorganization). We had to reconcile new areas of research for our project where we lacked expertise. Concerning team-based work, we all had

some minor knowledge of what it entailed but no real experience in research or development. In addition, our knowledge of police investigative work was minimal. The toughest problem, however, was evidence-based policing. Evidence-based policing relies on evaluations and implementation of tactics based on measured changes in behavior (Sherman, 2013) and differs from our inductive qualitative ethnographic project plan in terms of epistemology and ontology. In consequence, methodology was affected too. An opportunity emerged when the police representatives said that rigorous quasi-experimental studies with control groups would be hard to accommodate. This was the start of a compromise that ended in “knowledge-based” rather than “evidence-based” approach. Together, these efforts were done in order to make our research proposal more attractive to the police.

After the meeting, we sat down at a restaurant to discuss what we had just gone through. We tried to have a positive outlook and view this setback as manageable, but there were critical voices as well as dismay within the research group of four. In the end, we agreed to try to meet the demands of the police *as well as* get data for our original research interest—that is, sensemaking and organizational change. We decided that getting access and studying police investigative work would provide ample opportunities to collect data on sensemaking and the effects of the reorganization as well. We would thus try to cater both the funding agency and keep them informed through their formal system for project follow-up while also meeting the demands of the police.

The conflict between our professional ethics and the negotiation for access was perhaps most prominent in this instance. In changing the focus of our research, we were “side-tracking” our original intention. Considering violations in Mertonian norms, this side-tracking most strikingly violates the norm of disinterestedness, where we let special interests, in this case the police, dictate research questions and what the research should be about. Figuring that the solution would provide access, and that the data collection would at least partially agree with the original research interest as well as our obligations to the research grant funder, it seemed a reasonable solution. However, in doing this, we felt it was practically engaging in a form of deception (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009). Knowledge- and team-based investigative work was hence part of our “research bargain” (Horwood & Moon, 2003) that ultimately led to full access to the police station.

### *Phase 3: Access Granted*

With a project that had undergone radical changes in order to uphold field access, the third significant phase of access negotiations was characterized by planning data collection and establishing social contact with informants through activities such as visits, presentations about the project, and introductions to the research team. The access negotiation process as described here culminated when the research team received access cards to the police department (see timeline June 13, 2016). The cards provided the possibility of moving relatively

freely around the research site. As previously mentioned, this took place nearly 2 years after access negotiations began, and it was defined as a pivotal moment of success. Remarkably, the security clearance that we eventually received was higher than for an ordinary police officer.

While the third phase of the access process may seem straightforward, it included challenges resulting from the previous phases. One challenge regarded the presentations of the research team and information regarding research objectives to the informants. In this regard, after a number of iterations and reformulations, the project had a multitude of formulated objectives, some emphasizing theoretical development and some involving operational knowledge building and “deliverables.” These types of objectives existed side by side and were emphasized differently depending on the audience as the research team alternated, respectively, between adherence to the core values of the police and the funding agency. In short, through information provided about the objectives of the project, each stakeholder had the feeling of being in the “driver’s seat,” as the research team strategically managed and presented the project differently to them in order to secure access, funding, or other material conditions that would help realize the project. This type of strategic maneuvering has been referred to as minor deception (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009).

The related issue of having multiple objectives and presenting them strategically was also a salient worry. It generated concern about the risk of losing access based on having emphasized the “wrong” objectives for the wrong recipients. This resulted in a feeling of having to “tip-toe.” One example of this concern was a subquestion related to the original research project. As mentioned, the original research idea was about sensemaking and organizational change, and a specific aspect of this regarded the workings of power in sensemaking and change. The concept of power carries an historical burden, not always favorable for social scientists doing fieldwork in organizational settings (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). In essence, one cannot talk about power without risking a fall into disfavor, regardless of one’s intentions—or getting limited information in an interview. During the access negotiation process, we became well aware of this challenge and had to adjust our presentation of this subquestion accordingly. Our particular interest of studying power in sensemaking was not unspoken, but it was often talked about indirectly, avoiding detailed explanations in order not to arouse distrust toward the project and jeopardize the hard-earned research access.

Within the last phase of access negotiations, we found traces of tensions in relation to Merton’s norms of universalism and disinterestedness. The boundary of the principle of universalism is violated through the way we used our *persona* to impact the access. By choosing the words we used with great care and trying to appear as credible and trustworthy as we possibly could, we deviated from the ideal of being judged independent of who we are and how we speak. For example, mentioning the word “power” at the initial stage, before a deeper understanding of the theoretical background had been introduced, would

simply have exposed the project to a high risk concerning issues about access. Second, we found a tension in relation to the principle of disinterestedness. Since we adapted our use of certain words and concepts, taking account of how we imagine that the police will react, we let special interest impinge on our research.

## Discussion

In this article, we have aimed to reconstruct and reflect upon our experience of gaining access to a police organization for the purposes of research. Drawing upon the autoethnographic approach (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2008), and following what is generally considered good practice in such an approach (see Duncan, 2004; Holt, 2001), we relied on reports, presentations, e-mails, chats, and memory for our analysis. In contrast to a majority of the literature on gaining access, we did not focus on the strategies and tactics per se but the relation between Merton’s (1973) norms and reality and how a gap in between influences the production of knowledge. Our experience was that the process of gaining access to the police is an arduous, time-consuming process that requires a lot of hard, unpaid work. The sheer amount of time spent on meetings, drafting agreements, and communications back and forth was overwhelming to the point of exhaustion. In addition, given how research is financed, this kind of access work is “unpaid” and largely dependent on researchers’ bootstrapping. Neither do access negotiations, except in a few instances, amount to any “outputs” in the form of knowledge production.

At the end of a frustrating process, we identified a number of problems pertaining to the research profession. These problems allow us to draw attention to the work of gaining access and the associated potential ethical dilemmas. Some of these have already been covered in the literature, targeting the access negotiation problematic. For instance, we certainly felt it necessary to engage in “minor deceptions” (Alcadipani & Hodgson, 2009; Blix & Wettergren, 2015; Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016), particularly concerning the police as a special interest and the wishes of the research team and grant funder. We also experienced the problems of letting stakeholders, such as the police, have partial control of publications. This partial control contributed to a form of self-censoring to avoid displeasing the organization (Clark, 2010; Punch, 1986). Moreover, we learned that access is never a fixed state and that despite our high-clearance key card to the police station, we needed to continuously maintain and work with maintaining access (Carmel, 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Taylor & Land, 2014), as the police would otherwise limit our research.

Besides these known issues, the application of Merton’s norms to the problem of access negotiation highlights other problems that are related to the role of research institutions in society. These problems originate in a conflict between scientific norms on one hand and the practical reality of (qualitative) research in organizations on the other. Table 1 is a summary of our findings regarding the negotiations and conflicts with Mertonian norms that we identified.



**Table 1.** Summary of Results and Norm Conflicts.

Phase in Access Negotiation	Clash	Mertonian Norm Conflict	Consequence
Phase 1	Subjugation to personal screening; control over research output	Universalism; communalism	Submission
Phase 2	Theoretical interest vs. practical use; police conditioning access	Disinterestedness	"Sidetracking" original research plan; minor deception
Phase 3	Presenting oneself and the project	Universalism; Disinterestedness	"Tip-toeing" around certain concepts; minor deception

The researched organization's "conditioning" of access, for instance, challenges the (social) scientist's freedom to decide what should be studied and how it should be studied. In Mertonian terms, this means that knowledge is not produced "disinterestedly." Rather, it is produced through conditions associated with access. Furthermore, there is a particular agenda that dictates knowledge production, and this agenda is not set within academia. The organization wants results that are immediately beneficial rather than empirically deep, theoretically sound, thoroughly analyzed, and beneficial in the long term. In particular, we as scholars are forced to negotiate the kind of questions asked. Thus, the freedom and autonomy to pursue knowledge for the "truth, beauty, and justice of scholarly work" (March 2003) can be compromised. Our main point is that we experienced a problem with professional ethics that concerns impartiality and academic freedom with regard to access negotiations. Strict adherence to Merton's norms would simply mean that we would not have been let into the organization. Concurrently, completely following the wishes of the organization is at odds with other scientific ethics and practices.

### *Implications of the Normative Dissonance*

The identified dissonance between research ideals and research practice in this case points to two main practical implications.

The first implication is that the scientific norms, on one hand, represent a long-term logic that is based on rules, values, and knowledge production for the sake of knowledge. On the other hand, the practical reality represents a short-term logic of practice and knowledge production based on situation-specific temporal needs. The former is tightly coupled to a theoretical and ideal role of research in society, whereas the latter is loosely coupled to the ideal research role, since the concerns and wishes of other stakeholders influence the ability to

maintain an idealistic position. As the logics of practice meet and clash in the negotiations over access, there is a slow uncoupling that jeopardizes the role of knowledge production in the society. We identify a number of mechanisms that contract the gap between logic and action, but these mechanisms are temporary and mostly conceal the conflict. These mechanisms are based on Mertonian norms, but reality forces the scientific community to balance between conflicting demands and only temporarily adhere to them. For example, although the objectives of the original project were tweaked, this is not something that will be discussed at length anywhere other than in this particular method paper. Instead, conventionally, discussions will be related to the particular question that is posed in the specific article, for example, how investigators make sense of their work.

Rather than protecting the norms, the process by which articles are written hides the conflict. Moreover, the requirements of scientific journals for openness and making materials available for scrutiny (organized skepticism) collide with the organization's wishes to keep some aspects of research work "in house" or even secret.

The second implication concerns the types of written codes of conduct and professional ethics in fieldwork and studies of humans. Relevant norms and practices concern, for instance, informed consent, the rights of research subjects, and confidentiality. However, these policies and practices may have developed to the extent that they also are in conflict with what we understand to be Merton's view of the core mission of research practice—to produce knowledge for knowledge's sake. Regarding the "minor deceptions," "side-tracking," and "tip-toeing," we have described, they are probably ethically doubtful in light of the written ethical guidelines of research, for example, informed consent. However, bearing this in mind, are we nonetheless right in practicing some degree of deception, given that our job is to disregard special interests in the pursuit of knowledge? Is there a degree of "justified deception" in negotiating access to organizations? How do we tell when it is justified and when it is not?

The normative dissonance between a "classic" account of scientific norms such as Merton's and the reality of research practice indicates a changing view of research's role in society, where dissonance arises due to conflicting discourses. In opposition to Merton, scholars also have a range of norms as well as explicit policy guidelines stating that research should be useful to society. There are calls for a more community-based approach to research, where the distanced objective role is criticized (e.g. Jordan, Gust, & Scheman, 2005). MacFarlane and Cheng (2008), in their study of the contemporary support among scholars for Merton's norms, show that there are opposing views in this matter. They suggest that "interestedness" and "individuality" are competing views on disinterestedness and communalism.

In conclusion, in this article, we complement more common "tip-giving" literature on how researchers should proceed in negotiations regarding access with a critical reflection about an inherent conflict between idealized norms and realities of research. We have presented the challenges we were exposed to

and reflected upon the theoretical and practical implications of those. We do not claim that idealized norms can be nor should be followed; rather, such norms may provide a vocabulary with which we can sensitize future research to the process of access negotiations. With this article, we therefore would like to open up scholarly discussions on a new research landscape—a landscape where traditional norms of research are competing with other discourses and increasing demands from organizations that we wish to study.


### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare [2015-00700].

### ORCID iD

Lindberg Ola  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8517-0313>

### References

- Alcadipani, R., & Hodgson, D. (2009). By any means necessary? Ethnographic access, ethics and the critical researcher. *Tamara Journal for Critical Organization Inquiry*, 7, 127–146.
- Anderson, M. S., Ronning, E. A., DeVries, R., & Martinson, B. C. (2010). Extending the Mertonian norms: Scientists' subscription to norms of research. *Extending the Mertonian Norms: Scientists' Subscription to Norms of Research*, 81, 366–393. doi:10.1353/jhe.0.0095
- Bell, E., & Bryman, A. (2007). The ethics of management research: An exploratory content analysis. *British Journal of Management*, 18, 63–77. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8551.2006.00487.x
- Bengry-Howell, A., & Griffin, C. (2012). Negotiating access in ethnographic research with “hard to reach” young people: establishing common ground or a process of methodological grooming? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 15, 403–416. doi:10.1080/13645579.2011.600115
- Blix, S. B., & Wettergren, Å. (2015). The emotional labour of gaining and maintaining access to the field. *Qualitative Research*, 15, 688–704. doi:10.1177/1468794114561348
- Carmel, S. (2011). Social access in the workplace: Are ethnographers gossips? *Work, Employment & Society*, 25, 551–560. doi:10.1177/0950017011407969
- Cassell, J. (1988). The relationship of observer to observed when studying up. In R. G. Burgess (Ed.), *Studies in Qualitative Methodology* (pp. 89–108). Greenwich, England: Jai Press.
- Clark, T. (2010). Gaining and maintaining access: Exploring the mechanisms that support and challenge the relationship between gatekeepers and researchers. *Qualitative Social Work*, 10, 485–502. doi:10.1177/1473325009358228
- Crowhurst, I. (2013). The fallacy of the instrumental gate? Contextualising the process of gaining access through gatekeepers. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 16, 463–475. doi:10.1080/13645579.2013.823282
- Crowhurst, I., & Kennedy-Macfoy, M. (2013). Troubling gatekeepers: Methodological considerations for social research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 16, 457–462. doi:10.1080/13645579.2013.823281
- Cunliffe, A. L., & Alcadipani, R. (2016). The politics of access in fieldwork: Immersion, backstage dramas, and deception. *Organizational Research Methods*, 1–27. doi:10.1177/10944281166639134
- Czarniawska, B. (2007). Shadowing and other techniques for doing fieldwork in modern societies. Malmö, NE: Liber.
- Dickens, D. R., & Fontana, A. (1994). *Postmodernism and Social Inquiry*. London, England: Routledge.
- Duncan, M. (2004). Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3, 1–14.
- Duncombe, J., & Jessop, J. (2002). “Doing rapport” and ethics of “faking friendship.” In M. Mauthener, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in qualitative research* (pp. 107–122). London, England: Sage.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research*, 36, 273–290.
- Emmel, N., Hughes, K., Greenhalgh, J., & Sales, A. (2007). Accessing socially excluded people—Trust and the gatekeeper in the researcher-participant relationship. *Sociological Research Online*, 12. doi:10.5153/sro.1512
- Feldman, M. S., Bell, J., & Berger, M. T. (2003). *Gaining access a practical and theoretical guide for qualitative researchers*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Fleming, P., & Spicer, A. (2014). Power in management and organization science. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 8, 237–298. doi:10.1080/19416520.2014.875671
- Fyfe, N. R., Terpstra, J., & Tops, P. (2013). *Centralizing forces? Comparative perspectives on contemporary police reform in Northern and Western Europe*. Hague, the Netherlands: Eleven International.
- Gergen, K.J., & Thatchenkery, T.J. (2004). Organization science as social construction, *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 40, 228–249.
- Grant, A. (2017). “I don’t want you sitting next to me.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16, 160940691771239. doi:10.1177/1609406917712394
- Harklau, L., & Norwood, R. (2005). Negotiating researcher roles in ethnographic program evaluation: A postmodern lens. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 36(6), 278–288. doi:10.1525/aeq.2005.36.3.278
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: principles in practice* (3rd ed.). Milton Park, England: Routledge.
- Holt, N. L. (2001). Beyond technical reflection: Demonstrating the modification of teaching behaviors using three levels of reflection. *Avante*, 7, 66–76.
- Horwood, J., & Moon, G. (2003). Accessing the research setting: The politics of research and the limits to enquiry. *Area*, 35, 106–109. doi:10.1111/1475-4762.00116
- Jordan, C., Gust, S., & Scheman, N. (2005). The trustworthiness of research: The paradigm of community-based research. *Metropolitan Universities*, 16, 39–58.
- Lacey, H. (2005). *Is science value free? Values and scientific understanding*. London, England: Routledge.

- Macfarlane, B., & Cheng, M. (2008). Communism, universalism and disinterestedness: Re-examining contemporary support among academics for Merton's scientific norms. *Journal of Academic Ethics, 6*, 67–78. doi:10.1007/s10805-008-9055-y
- Merton, R. K. (1973). *The sociology of science: Theoretical and empirical investigations*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Peirce. (1955). *The philosophical writings of Peirce*. New York, NY: Dover.
- Peticca-Harris, A., DeGama, N., & Elias, S. R. S. T. A. (2016). A dynamic process model for finding informants and gaining access in qualitative research. *Organizational Research Methods, 19*, 376–401.
- Punch, M. (1986). *Politics and ethics of fieldwork*. London, England: Sage.
- Reiner, R. (2010). *The politics of the police*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, Incorporated.
- Rivoal, I., & Salazar, N. B. (2013). Contemporary ethnographic practice and the value of serendipity. *Social Anthropology, 21*, 178–185. doi:10.1111/1469-8676.12026
- Rowe, M. (2007). Tripping over molehills: Ethics and the ethnography of police work. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 10*, 37–48. doi:10.1080/13645570600652792
- Sherman, L. W. (2013). The rise of evidence-based policing: targeting, testing, and tracking. *Crime and Justice, 42*, 377–451. doi:10.1086/670819
- Small, H. (2004). On the shoulders of Robert Merton: Towards a normative theory of citation. *Scientometrics, 60*, 71–79. doi:10.1023/B:SCIE.0000027310.68393.bc
- Taylor, S., & Land, C. D. (2014). Organizational anonymity and the negotiation of research access. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal, 9*, 1. doi:10.1108/QROM-10-2012-1104
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 7*, 38–53. <http://doi.org/Article>.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.