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**GATEKEEPING: AN OBSTACLE TO CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH WITH  
INDIAN YOUTH DRUG USERS IN CHATSWORTH, KWAZULU-NATAL****Nirmala Gopal<sup>1</sup> & Bonita Marimuthu<sup>2</sup>****ABSTRACT**

*Every research study has a story and this article tells the story of the researchers' challenges in accessing participants for a study. Thus this article draws on the researchers' experiences with gatekeeping dilemmas while attempting to research drug addiction among a select sample of youth in a historically Indian township in Kwa Zulu Natal. The article highlights the challenges in gaining access to an Indian sample of drug users. Some of the reasons depart from the premise that perhaps the most challenging factor is that most of the populations relevant to the study of drug addiction, such as under age youth, traffickers, suppliers and or drug lords, constitute so-called hidden populations. Heckathorn (1997), argues that "A hidden population is a group of individuals, whose membership in hidden populations often involves stigmatized or illegal behaviour, leading individuals to refuse to co-operate, or give unreliable answers to protect their privacy." Consequently for this empirical study attempting to 'research' a 'hidden population' resulted in challenges not necessarily observed with other research topics. This research argues through a theoretical framework how gatekeeping challenges may impact 'important' research agendas. This research article further highlights principal gatekeeping challenges associated with research in the field of illicit drug use which is the focus of this research article. This is done through reflections on the researchers' methodological journey namely gaining access to a relevant sample. The article concludes with suggestions for researchers attempting research with 'hidden populations' in future criminological research. This article explores some of the issues that researchers should consider when carrying out research with Gypsy-Travellers.*

**Keywords:** *Methodological dilemmas; gaining research access, illicit drugs; Chatsworth*

**INTRODUCTION:**

The recent publicising of the extreme and 'endemic' drug offending in the country has increased national attention, on the seriousness and frequent occurrence of social and economic crimes related to the 'endemic drug epidemic'. The socio-economic effects of this highly addictive drug are devastating. It has been responsible for the breakdown of many families, and has left people destitute. Intelligent pupils have become school dropouts; young girls have prostituted themselves for the habit. It has made thieves out of harmless people. It has caused endless havoc that continues to eat into the fabric of our society (Naran, Tribune Herald 2006)." The number of drug related crimes in South Africa increased from 52, 900 in April 2004 to 151, 000 in March 2011, an increase of 140 percent (SAPS 2011). Statistics for the Chatsworth area reveals that drug related crimes rose from 449 in April 2004 to 1060 in March 2011. Drug related criminal behaviour according to local and National members of the South African Police Services (SAPS) has a serious negative impact on school learners, youth and communities at large. In response to the recent and ongoing drug related incidences in Chatsworth, Kwa Zulu Natal, the previous KZN premier Dr Zweli Mkhize, in 2011, set up a task team of various stakeholders (government and civil society) to seek solutions in addressing this scourge. This response was also as a consequence of pressure exerted by

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human rights and social movements who are deeply concerned with safety and security and moral demise of a community once entrenched in rich cultural, political and social values, and a deep sense of social cohesiveness.

This article does not focus on the issue of illicit drug use however; it is acknowledged that a certain degree of contextualisation is required in order to better understand the purpose and relevance of this article.

The World Drug Report of 2012 (Kresina; Bruce and Mulvey, 2013) claims that, globally, illicit drug use is a common occurrence and is a growing health problem in some regions. Global reporting estimates indicate that approximately 230 million people or 5 percent of the global adult population have used illicit drugs. The report further asserts that resource-limited settings or poorer countries are seeing the growth and emergence of illicit drug use as a significant national health issue. This resonates with South Africa's concern with illicit drug use translating into national health crises as espoused in the National Drug Master Plan (2013-2017).

'Frenzied' reactions by national and provincial officials seldom address the problem of illicit drug offending effectively. Often programmes are developed quickly, with little empirical information on proven methods, effective programme content, or design. In most cases these programmes are usually based on a need that has been assumed as a consequence of media hype, not a need that has been proved through the examination of local data. It is against this backdrop that this article will attempt to share the dilemmas with gaining access to a drug offending population.

International and national illegal drug addiction has become a topic of major concern for civil societies and state departments as the age of illegal drug users' decrease and the drug of choice is the more addictive drug with dire consequences (Senior Superintendent Devon Naicker, head of narcotics in the organised crime unit)., According to The Naked Truth Particularly prevalent in the Indian community of Chatsworth, Durban, the effects of the abuse of sugars, a highly addictive mixture of cocaine and heroin, has devastating effects on society, health, education and employment. Children as young as ten are often forced into dealing and prostitution to support their addiction.

As South Africa and countries throughout the world grapple with this social and economic epidemic the need for risk focussed interventions are becoming increasingly necessary. The most promising route to effective strategies for the prevention of adolescent drug problems is through a risk-focused approach usually achieved through empirical research with drug users and other relevant role-players. However in order to understand the problem of illegal drug addiction and make some firm empirically directed recommendations the researcher must first gain access to participants. The researchers set out to generate data according to their research design, which was qualitative in nature. The researchers chose the methodology, the sample site and a sampling framework.

### **"THE BEGINNING OF THE CHALLENGE"**

When one reads criminological research in most books or journals it may appear that the research process follows "a very systematic and detached logic informed by the particular intellectual and methodological premises of its line of inquiry". There is, of course, considerable truth in this argument which is usually seen in the 'finished product' of the research. However, this rather sterile picture may, by itself, provide a false impression of what actually goes into 'conducting' criminological research. As Hughes, (2000) adds, "All too often research publications fail to tell us about the hidden difficulties, constraints and limitations behind the apparently smooth and detached appearance of the research process" While Garland et al, (2006) argue that research can, and should be, a constructive attempt to increase knowledge and understanding about a topic and should "by working through the dense entanglements of power and interdependencies that permeate all social relations".

Garland further maintains that in an endeavour to increase knowledge through research “the methodological approaches adopted need careful consideration in order to generate the most effective data, as well as facilitate the most meaningful and ethical contact as possible (Garland *et al*, 2006). Schatzman and Strauss (1973:14), add to Garland’s argument on increasing knowledge by maintaining that, “field-based research is more like an umbrella of activity beneath which any technique may be used for gaining the desired knowledge”. However “selecting a site, gaining access to the site, entering the field, confidentiality and eliciting sensitive information when using youth as participants”. This in itself could be challenging.

One such criminological example is conducting research on the use of illicit drugs that yields great practical challenges. This is possibly because of fear by participants because of an illegal activity (use of illicit drugs) or that they have no desire to contribute to ‘knowledge production’

For the purpose of this article gatekeeper is defined as, ‘The person who controls research access. In other words they are senior individuals in an organization who should consent to or facilitate respondents to participate in a study (Jupp, 2006:126).

Access according to Jupp (2006; 2) is defined as, “ The process of gaining and maintaining entry to a setting or social group, or of establishing working relations with individuals, in order that social research can be undertaken.”

#### **LITERATURE ON ETHICAL ISSUES IN YOUTH RESEARCH IN SOUTH AFRICA:**

Research ethics, according to, (Gallagher, 2009), is a complex factor, which primarily deals with the values of conduct which is right and conduct which is wrong. “Reflection of various epistemological paradigms and methodological practices within the particular social and cultural contexts, (Trussell, 2008). The development of Youth studies has amplified the voice of the Youth, the study of youth have directed an increased importance of listening to a child. According to (Gallagher, 2009), researchers have concluded that the ethical issues of youth as samples can be simplified to ‘codified sets of principles’ and if these sets are followed systematically the research will be more ethically solid. This factor can be further emphasized, for example, according to, (Hill, 2005; Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher, 2009; Alderson & Morrow, 2011), when conducting the research study ensure that the “literature uses ethics to promote exploration and examination of Dilemma’s, rather than purely as a basis for rules of research conduct.” It is important that researchers conducting research with youth as samples emphasize the ethical considerations and that ethical issue are precise throughout the research study, (Alderson, 1995; Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Hill, 2005; Lindsay, 2000; Morrow and Richards, 1996). “The key ethical issues discussed in the literature are gaining access into research sites, informed consent, and protection of youth, anonymity and confidentiality.” It is absolutely essential for the researcher to guarantee confidentiality of their participants and samples, there must be no doubt that what is discussed is anonymous and the participant is protected by what they discuss. The researcher must also ensure that they gain consent to conduct the research as well as too use the information which the participant has shared.

#### **KEY ETHICAL ISSUES IN CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH:**

##### **Gaining access**

Gaining access to participants in order to collect data almost always involves going through gatekeepers or facilitators, and even through a hierarchy of gatekeepers (Hood *et al*, 1996) or tiers of management. Using gatekeepers usually involves an additional stage of providing the gatekeeper with information about the study and asking them to suggest or contact potential volunteers to participate. This may also involve the building of rapport and trust with the gatekeeper before doing so with potential/actual participants, Before gatekeepers are likely to

help they will need to be convinced of the benefits for the people who they will often regard as in need of their protection.

### **Informed Consent**

The ethical issues of conducting research using Youth and gaining consent has generated sufficient amounts of debates. This may be as a result of the process of gaining consent in order to proceed ethically with the research study. There is four central parts to informed consent, they are as follows, and firstly, informed consent involves a written or verbal agreement. Secondly, consent can only be granted if the participants understand the research and are informed what the research entails. Thirdly, informed consent must be given willingly without intimidation. And lastly, consent must be negotiable allowing the participants to be able to withdraw at any stage in which they feel uncomfortable, (Gallagher, 2009). The most important ethical issue that must be emphasized is the balance of protecting the youth from potential harm of the research topic and allowing them also to benefit from the results of the research study. The issue of harm and risk to the participants is not simple; therefore, gate keeping which the purpose of is to protect children from harm, increases obstacles to children's partaking in research studies, research (Hill, Davis, Prout and Tisdall, 2004; Hood, Kelley and Mayall, 1996; Masson, 2004; Miller, 2000; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Powell & Smith, 2009).

### **Anonymity and confidentiality**

Gate keeping becomes an issue when the youth involved in the research study are considered susceptible, which then requires more protection. And even when the research topic is too sensitive for the youth to participate in the research study. The protection of participants is a genuine concern for the researcher and is of utmost importance, (Butler & Williamson, 1994). Because these participants require more protection they are discouraged from partaking or their opinions and views are not freely expressed in a safe environment, which causes them to be gate-kept from the research study because they become a basis for potential risk, (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). In terms of privacy, the location of where the research is conducted must be a safe environment. And the researcher must take cognizance of the fact that the participants anonymity and confidentiality is ensured. The safest environment to conduct research with youth as samples is at schools or at home, the confidentiality is compromised because parents are curious and will pressurize the researcher or participants for information.

### **Eliciting sensitive information**

There have been many debates about passive or active consent procedures and which of the two is more ethical when dealing with sensitive topics. The former, Passive consent permits researchers to avoid gate keepers which protect children from harm, and allow youth to participate and share their opinions and knowledge on topics that are considered to be too sensitive, (Carrol-Lind et al, 2006). For example, topics such as, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, alcohol abuse or HIV/AIDS, the youth is able to talk more openly about such sensitive topics. The latter, active consent, serves to protect participants privacy and agree to the freedom of choice, (Alderson, 2004). However, active consent may be an obstacle because it relies on others giving consent for research participation. For example, the consent of parents or teachers to partake in research study (Alderson, 1995).

Reflexivity is a method used to manage the gap between adult samples, children samples and youth samples. This is achieved by encouraging self-esteem by the researcher regarding assumptions about adolescence (youth) and how the research process may be influenced, this involves understanding of adolescent perceptions and adolescence as adult participants. Researchers should pay close attention to their own aims, beliefs and hypothesis and how this impacts the research process and on the enrolment of participants. Researchers



should reflect on themselves and determine what they contribute to the research relationship, as well as including ethical issues and methods of the research process.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study first describes the databases accessed in terms of relevant literature and statistics and then describes the research process. The researchers first conducted a search for published and accessible material (research reports, articles and conference presentations) relevant to illicit drugs and hidden communities in South Africa using online searches (EBSCO, JSTOR and Science Direct). The researchers searched for key terms such as illicit drug use, methodological challenges in hidden communities, researching sensitive topics, drug related crimes, drug abuse and treatment. For information on generic illicit drug use the researchers accessed the UNODC reports, South African Police Services (SAPS), annual reports, the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) database, the South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (SACENDU) reports and the Human Sciences Research Council research reports.

The second phase of the study was based on face-to-face interviews conducted with participants with knowledge of illicit drug users in the Chatsworth area. Participants were selected through snowball sampling. There were 4 males and five females aged between 35-55 years who participated in the study. All participants reside in the greater Chatsworth area. All participants were in formal employment. The interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed to place and lasted between 15 minutes to an hour each. Participants were ensured confidentiality hence they are referred to by a pseudonym in the analysis section.

All interviews were conducted in English. Since participation in the study was dependent on availability and willingness, the study may exclude unintentionally those with divergent approaches or experiences. Utilising a working model of thematic analysis, the data were analysed through a step-by-step procedure which began by searching through the transcripts of the interviews for repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006, quoted in Gopal, 2013). Data was analysed firstly using primary analysis in which each of the responses of the questions was examined and the implications thereof presented where they indicated some trend or fact that was of interest (Gopal, 2014).

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The table below provides the demographic data of the respondents. According to the table four of the nine respondents are male and five are female. Their roles are varied from Chairperson of the Chatsworth Anti-Drug Forum, to Social Development officer to Magistrate to Head Prosecutor, Child Psychologist to social worker, police captain, correctional service officer, to governing body chairperson. An analysis of the positions occupied by the various respondents indicates individuals relevant to the fields of youth and or criminal justice.

**Table 1: Demographics of Respondents**

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Institution</b>
GK1	Male	Chairperson of the Chatsworth Anti-Drug Forum	Chatsworth Anti-Drug Forum
GK2	Female	Social Development officer	Department of Social Development (Chatsworth)
GK3	Female	Magistrate	Children's Court in Chatsworth
GK4	Female	Head Prosecutor	Chatsworth Court
GK5	Male	Child Psychologist	R.K Khan Hospital in Chatsworth
GK6	Female	Social Worker	ABH Children's Home in Chatsworth

GK7	Male	Police Captain	Chatsworth Police Station
GK8	Female	Correctional Service Officer	Department of Correctional Services
GK9	Male	Governing Body Chairperson	Schools in Durban South Region in Kwa Zulu Natal

In the case of this research after receiving permission from the university in June 2012 to conduct research with 'vulnerable groups the researchers sought Gatekeeper's approval from the director of the Anti-Drug Forum an NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) based at the Chatsworth Youth Centre. An appointment was set up with the Programme Co-ordinator of the Youth Centre. After informing him of the purpose for the visit the researchers were informed that he does not work directly with offending youth. The researchers were referred to institutions/organisations in Chatsworth which supposedly would be of assistance. June 2012 the researchers made several phone calls to the office of GK of the Chatsworth Anti-Drug Forum. On each attempt his secretary convincingly promised a meeting with Mr Pillay but it did not materialise. Out of frustration the researchers temporarily abandoned that idea of the Chatsworth Anti-Drug Forum as a research site.

The researchers proceeded to contact the GK 2 from the Chatsworth Department of Social Development given their work in supporting juveniles with drug addiction and related anti-social behaviour. After several phone calls to him and with no success the researchers proceeded to the next suggested point of access. The researchers made telephonic contact with GK 3 a magistrate at the Children are Court and were informed by her administrator of her unavailability. The administrator refused any possibility of a meeting maintaining "it would be impossible due to GK 3's busy schedule and GK 3 would be very angry with me if I set up a meeting that is not related to her role function."

The next access point was GK 4 a Head Prosecutor at the Chatsworth Court who explained GK 4 explained, "GK 3 is more strategically placed (i.e. Children's Court) to provide access to participants for the study". After five unsuccessful months of finalising the participants. The contacted GK 5 a psychologist from R.K Khans Hospital in Chatsworth, requesting a meeting with her. After outlining the purpose of the research she informed the researchers that she was "too busy with her work commitments and there was no chance of her being able to assist". On 1 August 2012 the researchers persevered by contacting GK 6 a Social Worker at the ABH Children's Home in Chatsworth. Although she sounded helpful she informed the researchers that they "do not deal with youth offenders, but rather, only with orphans."

Then on 6 August 2012, despite the various counts of disillusionment and disappointments, the researchers approached GK 7 a Captain at the Chatsworth Police Station who directed them to the Chatsworth Court and advised "they are the best people to assist you". On 20 August 2012 the researchers decided to contact the only individual on the Youth Centre Programme Co-ordinator referral list (GK 8) from the Department of Correctional Service. The researchers were optimistic when after an explanation of the purpose of the research she advised the researchers to write a letter of permission to the Department of Correctional Services to gain access to participants. On 24 August 2012 the researchers accessed the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) website which outlines the DSC research application requirements. All research projects involving an offender or member of SA Department of Correctional Services is subject to a formal application, review and approval process as described in DCS Research Policy and all research applications must be made on the appropriate forms, namely: The Research Application Form (G179) and the Agreement form. The DCS Research Ethics Committee only conducts meetings every 3 months and this meant a further three months delay with the possibility of permission being



declined. On 3 September 2012 through some rigorous networking the researchers managed to reconnect with GK 1 from the Anti-Drug Forum. Between the dates 3-20 September 2012 GK 1 agreed to several meetings. On confirming the scheduled meetings prior the meetings the secretary would advise, "He has another commitment and that we should reschedule". On 28 September 2012 the meeting with GK1 eventually took place. Once again the researchers outlined the research brief and the role that the ADF could play in the research study. Between October and November 2012 the researchers set up interviews with parents and drug users, who sought support through the Anti-Drug Forum. On 8 January 2013 after realising the difficulty in obtaining the desired number of participants the researchers decided to set up a meeting with GK 9 a Governing Body Chairperson of the Durban South Region in Kwa Zulu Natal. During the meeting he assured the researchers that, "he would facilitate access to learners in Schools in Chatsworth". He was confident that there will be no further challenges. At the same time GK 1 advised, "To meet with another Magistrate Mrs Maharaj from the Chatsworth Court. For triangulation purposes the researchers contacted her. On 2 February 2013 the researchers met with the GK 3 from the Children's Court who then referred the researchers to the Probation Officers at the Chatsworth Court who she maintained, "has all information and contact details of youth offenders who appear at court. "After, speaking to the probation officers they directed the researchers to the Department of Social Development who they claimed, " have access to the youth offenders and they will set up appointments with youth offenders." GK2 from the Department of Social Development in Chatsworth redirected the researchers to the General Manager at the Department of Social Development Regional office for permission for the youth offenders to participate. The General Manager advised that, "The turnaround time would be about 6-8 months." And once again this idea had to be abandoned due to time constraints. In April 2013 the researchers had a follow up meeting with GK 1 provided a list of youth "who were potential participants for the study?" The researchers telephonically set up appointments to interview the participants. Of the 15 possible interviewees only one participant agreed to an interview. The rest were unavailable either because of school or work commitments.

In May 2013 as a last resort the researchers decided to work with GK 9 and disseminate questionnaires to learners in a select number of schools in Chatsworth. GK 9, after perusing the research proposal and the instrument emailed the questionnaire to a school principal to administer. She halted the process as she "required permission from The Department of Education." The research process was then in abeyance.

### **DISCUSSION OF REFLECTIONS**

This article has demonstrated the gatekeeping challenges that the researchers experienced in accessing hidden communities. The researchers' can only hypothesise that hidden communities are either embarrassed to talk about their lives or their habits. The researchers have shared a necessary and relevant research journey which may seem non-traditional for a journal article. The above discussion has further demonstrated challenges the researchers' experienced in attempting to gain access to respondents to investigate qualitatively a sensitive topic. The research journey has also shown that "gaining access and co-operation can require extensive negotiation in bureaucratic organizations," (Johnson 1975).

### **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Arising out of this research process the researchers suggest the following recommendations:

- Reducing the bureaucratic processes that stymie access to vulnerable groups once ethical clearance has been granted by a credible research organisation or institution of higher learning.

- Have a national state co-ordinated efficient approach to providing access to vulnerable groups for academic research
- Researchers should first identify a reliable sample and seek parental and participant consent when conceptualising the research topic.
- Researchers should work with NGOs that have a long and reliable history of working with vulnerable groups.

## CONCLUSION

This article has described some gatekeeping dilemmas that arose during a research study about youth perceptions on the causes and effects of illicit drug use. Caution needs to be exercised about whether or not the experiences of the researchers can be generalised. Sharing research experiences and challenges in a format that is accessible to a wide community of researchers could be beneficial in understanding some of the research gaps in criminological research in South Africa.

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