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weathering the storm*

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Relationshipwork in youth justice research: Weathering the storm

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Abstract

This paper argues that developing strong relationships is an important precursor to research being able to be done. We introduce the concept of *relationshipwork* as an integral part of the research process. The funded project that provides the context for this argument considers how the educational experiences of young people incarcerated into the youth justice system can be improved. Little has been written about enabling relationships that allow quality research to begin. This paper outlines the significance of the positive interactions with people that make it possible for research to be undertaken. The importance of the relationships developed between members of our research team and the project stakeholders is explained. The major contribution of this paper, then, is our conception of relationshipwork. We add this term to the three terms Van Maanen (1988, 2011) uses to describe the components of research: *fieldwork*, *headwork* and *textwork*.

Introduction

A common assumption held about research is that it means *fieldwork*. Fieldwork conjures up the idea of researchers leaving the laboratory or the desk to go out into the field to observe at first hand, and gather information about, the object of their enquiry. This kind of work often involves the researcher doing things to people, whether it be interviewing them, asking them to answer surveys or gathering other kinds of data from them.

Van Maanen (1988, 2011) offers a corrective to this idea by suggesting ways in which research is about more than just undertaking fieldwork. Rather, research can be broken down into three key (and overlapping) tasks. The aforementioned fieldwork (gathering information from the field) is one task, but it is accompanied by two other kinds of research 'work'. *Headwork* is what the researcher does to understand the previous scholarly literature to consider how these kinds of work might be used to analyse and think about the data, and *textwork* is the craft of writing about what has emerged from the headwork and the fieldwork.¹

Our study addresses the educational experiences of vulnerable young people who have been incarcerated into the youth justice system, including groups who are disproportionately represented in the justice system (Australian Government Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AGAIHW) 2018): For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are fourteen times as likely as non-indigenous young people to be under youth justice supervision.

During the early months of our research project, the project stalled, as a series of events – beyond our control – played out in the public domain. What follows is the story of how the various forms of what we term *relationshipwork* was undertaken by our team, and how this made it possible for us to stay on track. Given that we are still in the early stages of fieldwork, ours is not a narrative that reflects back on a completed project. However, it does show that as relationships are built and developed across the course of a project, relationships are required for authentic research (White & Drew 2011).

Relationshipwork

While engaging with Van Maanen's conceptions of fieldwork, headwork and textwork, the particular contribution of this paper is to draw attention to what we propose is yet another kind of work – relationshipwork. This refers to the nature of how key relationships are built, developed and fostered within a project's orbit, across the research team and with research partners, funders, research administration, stakeholders and interviewees.

Established predominantly at the project's front end, relationshipwork complements and extends Van Maanen's original three aspects of research. As we argue in this paper, the relationships developed

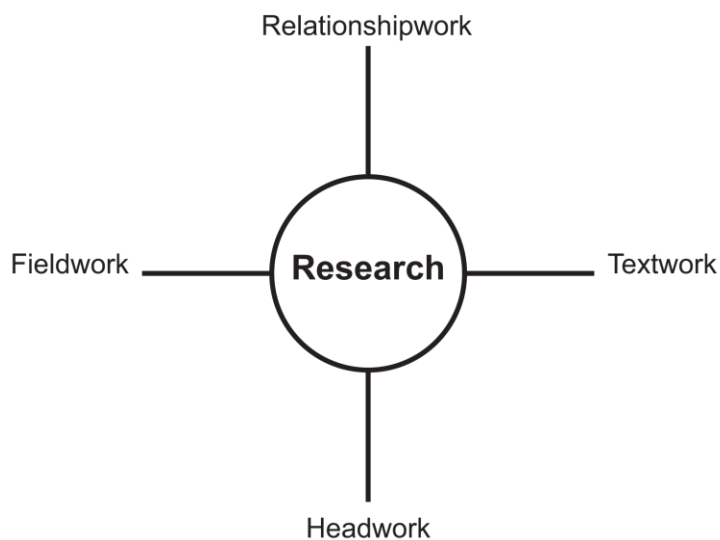
¹ Van Maanen coined these three terms to describe the tasks of ethnography. We focus on the relevance of the terms for describing the work of qualitative research more generally.

between researchers and stakeholders enable goodwill, clear communication and flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances as a project proceeds.

The significance of relationshipwork can be overlooked in the rush towards the field. Although the literature in various research disciplines, such as management, social work and psychology, emphasises the study of relationships, this is not in relation to the research process itself.

A brief Google Scholar search has yielded 600,000 references in response to a search query on how to do research. When the word 'relationships' was added to the search, 17,800 articles and chapters were returned. However, the focus of the publications identified was mostly trust and rapport between those 'doing' the research and those 'being' researched – the researchers and their participants. Relationship theory refers to consumer research (Fournier 1998), while in psychology the focus tends to be on family and peer relationships (Parke & Ladd 2016). However, very little has been written about the existence of important enabling relationships that that allow the research to be undertaken.

Figure 1 The four tasks of research



The project focus

Although the actual project is not the focus of this paper, a brief explanation of the study is provided in this section to include a context for our conception of relationshipwork. Titled *Improving education for young people on remand: Forging a prison to school pipeline*, our study examines education for young people who have been either sentenced or remanded into custody.

Parkville College is our research partner. This school operates from within the youth justice system in Australia's state of Victoria. Established by the Minister of Education in 2012, Parkville College provides schooling for young people detained in custody. Working with the Department of Justice and Regulation (DJR), this Victorian Government school operates six days a week for fifty-two weeks each year. Parkville College delivers education in youth justice centres located at Parkville and Malmsbury, the Flexible Learning Centre (located outside the secure fence on the Parkville site), and Victoria's Secure Welfare Services, which provides a short term residential placement for children at substantial and immediate risk but not involved in youth justice.

The school's positive impact on its students is acknowledged in a key recommendation of the Parliament of Victoria's *Inquiry into youth justices centres in Victoria*:

That the Department of Education and Training's Early Childhood and School Education Group consider whether the successful methods at Parkville College, including teacher training and lesson structures, can be adapted to provide further assistance to at-risk students in mainstream schools (Parliament of Victoria Legal and Social Issues Committee (PVLISIC) 2018, p.xxii).

Our study investigates why Parkville College is successful at engaging young people in education and what the school could do to improve longer-term educational planning.

By the conclusion of our project, the study will have interviewed incarcerated young people who attend Parkville College, students at the college's Flexible Learning Centre and teachers, leaders and managers from the Department of Justice and Regulation (DJR), the Department of Education and Training (DET) and Parkville College. The study will also analyse policy and operational data from DJR and Parkville College. The outcomes of this study are expected to identify strategies and advice for future operations.

The socio-political context of our study

Late in 2016 the project was granted funding from Victoria's Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, a philanthropic organisation. This coincided with a media storm that followed in the wake of riots that took place at the Parkville and Malmsbury youth justice centres during late 2016.²

As indicated in the foreword to the recent Parliament of Victoria's *Inquiry into youth justice centres in Victoria*, several factors of concern prompted the inquiry. Among these were 'well-publicised critical incidents in Victoria's youth justice system' (the youth justice centre riots) and increased numbers of young people on remand (PVLSIC 2018, p. xiii). As the inquiry observed:

It has become increasingly apparent in recent years that the youth justice system is not functioning as well as it once did (PVLSIC 2018, p.11).

A key Victorian Ombudsman report from 2010 considered the precinct at Parkville 'inappropriate for a custodial facility which houses vulnerable children' (Victorian Ombudsman 2010, p.37). The report recommended that the precinct be reviewed with 'a view to replacing it with a new facility' (p.40). These changes were not made at that time. More recently, several reports and inquiries have emerged nationwide regarding the critical state of youth custodial institutions (PVLSIC 2018; Armitage & Ogloff 2017; Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) 2017; Victorian Ombudsman 2017; Attorney-General's Department, Australian Government, 2017).

Although there has been a marked decrease in youth crime (Victorian Ombudsman 2017, p.6), the media reportage of the disturbances at the youth justice centres has been sensationalist and extensive. This has fanned community fear and negatively influenced community perceptions of the youth justice system and the young people themselves (Guerra 2017, p.3; 'Inquiry criticises Victoria's "punitive" youth justice system' 2018; PVLSIC 2018, p.15). In 2017 the Victorian Government announced the building of a new facility, and plans for this have been developed; the building is to be located in an outer suburb of Melbourne. In the meantime, the Government transported some young people from Parkville to an adult prison near the regional Victorian city, Geelong. This controversial action drew legal challenges, given its breaches of human rights (Davey 2017). In turn, it led to a higher level of media attention.

Problems also came to light regarding the working environment, staff training and staff shortages of custodial workers at the youth centres (Armitage & Ogloff 2017, pp.24-28). The findings of the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP)'s inquiry into how isolation, separation and lockdowns were used in the Victorian youth justice system were released after the disturbances. Lockdown periods refer to the times when young people are 'secured in their rooms during times of the day when they would otherwise be out of their rooms, engaged in daily activities and routines' (CCYP 2017, p.77). The Commission's report revealed that unexpected lockdowns impeded the children and young people's ability to participate in education (CCYP 2017, pp.82-83).

In the midst of the events referred to above, the oversight of young people in the youth justice system was shifted from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to the Department of Justice and Regulation (DJR), the government department that oversees adult prisons.

These events, and particular versions of the events that appeared in the media, presented concerning representations of the youth justice system and of young people themselves. As the Victorian Parliament's *Inquiry into youth justice centres in Victoria* notes:

² For a summary of the unrest at the youth justice precincts, see PVLSIC 2018, pp.11-12.

Inaccurate media narratives perpetuate negative stereotypes that cast young people as something to be feared and youth offending as an overwhelming problem. This achieves nothing aside from damaging young people in contact with the youth justice system ... (PVLSIC 2018, p.16).

Inevitably, these events impacted on our capacity to begin the research and, indeed, the feasibility of the project itself. Being able to gain access to conduct this study became a concern. And even if access was gained, these shifting circumstances impacted on the feasibility of the study.

Reflection and contingency plans

At this point, our focus on *relationshipwork* became critical to the life of the project and took the lead. In discussions with our entire research team, it was agreed that the project should pause until the dust had settled. The funding body was consulted and this decision was supported. The funder agreed to an extension of four months, adding this to the initial two-year lifespan. We were able to postpone the fieldwork. The study required access to people and data, based on formal ethics approval not only through the lead university but also through two government departments. In light of the recent events, this area was even more sensitive than before.

During this time, we put our energies into:

- (1) building a reference group comprising community and government stakeholders who could provide informed guidance, advice and support
- (2) undertaking a review of international literature as well as Australian reports and recent inquiries
- (3) writing and revising the numerous ethics applications (including revisions, different project stages and amendments) required by the lead university and two government departments.

The hiatus brought home to us the extent to which the ground had shifted in the youth justice space since we had first conceptualised this study. The exposure, and effects, of staffing issues, inadequate buildings and delayed government responses now sharpened our focus, emphasising even more the relevance of the project. In the preparatory work for this study, what became our 'learning' resonates with the idea that

... learning in (and out) of the field is uneven, usually unforeseen, and rests more on a logic of discovery and happenstance than a logic of verification and plan (Van Maanen 2011, p.220).

Moreover, what had appeared to be a constraining circumstance revealed itself to be advantageous. The tides of public opinion may continue to swirl around us, along with the pressures on each government tier to balance accountability with the perceptions of its constituency. However, as independent professional university researchers, our stance is one of self-containment. Since our project is not commissioned by a government or private body, we are not beholden to institutional perspectives, employer restrictions or public opinion. Nor are we in an advocacy position. The study is not an evaluation of Parkville College, but a rigorous investigation of educational practices and potential for improvement, especially for post-custody education. This freedom allows the study a high level of rigour, authenticity and credibility.

Fieldwork, headwork and textwork

We are currently undertaking the fieldwork, interviewing participants including young people in custody, teachers, managers, leaders from Parkville College, the Department of Justice and Regulation (DJR) and the Department of Education and Training (DET). The data includes policy and other internal documentation related to the education of young people in custody. Analysis of data in relation to the scholarly literature and research questions is being undertaken. This is the headwork (Van Maanen 2011, p.222) of synthesising and analysis to develop conclusions and deliver recommendations. Some of our textwork shall follow close on the heels of the headwork – reports, academic articles and book chapters – but, fulfilling Van Maanen's point about how these tasks can overlap, these elements appear in a variety of combinations at other times in the project. The writing of this paper is an example of where a concentration of headwork and textwork can take place separate to, yet still be informed by, the fieldwork currently unfolding. Additionally, as the six members of our research team – from three universities, two cities and Parkville College itself – collaborated to bring this piece of writing to completion, this paper is a tangible result of the previous relationshipwork undertaken.

Narratives of relationshipwork

We turn now to narratives drawn from our research experience so far, to focus on different aspects of relationshipwork. The purpose of this section is to illustrate how strong research relationships require communication, respect, time and work, but result in authentic and rigorous research, leading to new insights and a useful contribution to knowledge. It is hoped that this is useful not only for other researchers but also for those who commission or consume research.

1: Partnering Research

When the researchers joined forces with leaders at Parkville College to develop this study, we were building on strong, established relationships from previous collaboration and relevant, practical project outcomes. The researchers worked closely with school leaders to develop, refine and present the study proposal to the funding body.

It was through extensive discussion at a later point that the project team developed the proposal to put to the funding body that the project should be slowed down to allow for more temperate weather to arrive. The heat and dust generated by the media, politicians and legal challenges did eventually blow away, allowing the researchers to begin the lengthy ethics approval processes with the lead university and two government departments. The researchers and school leaders continued to maintain regular contact throughout all phases of the study.

Advice and clarification was frequently sought. When the school principal suggested that valuable data would be gained by also interviewing the older students, the researchers listened carefully. He argued that this group had been sentenced into custody and, so, lived without the complicating uncertainties of being on remand. This opened up the possibility of seeking their advice about how younger students could be better connected to education. Although it required yet another ethics amendment to three different committees, we saw the value in this suggestion, so we listened and acted.

When members of the leadership team met with the researchers to discuss fieldwork, the advice was offered about spending time in classrooms, getting to know routines and processes. This, they advised, would lead to greater success at the later point of recruitment. Researchers would spend many days just being part of the classrooms. What the school leaders advised the researchers to do was to establish themselves in the field and to build trust and rapport with the potential participants. This contrasts with the more traditional image of researchers swooping in with clipboards and questions.

The advice for the researchers to embed themselves in the classrooms was sound and also afforded the opportunity for classroom teachers to get to know the researchers and the purpose of the study. Because of the high levels of trust established between teachers and their students, the teachers would be key to researchers being able to talk with the young people. The researchers would benefit substantially from spending time in classrooms and from the positive interaction with the young people and their teachers. Indeed, in this instance, a benefit of our relationshipwork strengthened the fieldwork. It also demonstrates what Van Maanen has argued should happen during fieldwork – researchers learn to “live with and live like” someone else’ (Van Maanen 2011, p.219) and come to terms with ‘the situational dictates and pressures’ involved (p.220).

The leadership roles at Parkville College are demanding, with critical incidents and unexpected events frequently occurring. There are many demands on these staff members’ time, so they are not always immediately available. Between us all, a flexible approach has therefore developed. For example, one of our team members has commenced teacher interviews. Predisposed to forward planning, the researcher initially set the interviews up in advance, seeking to secure interview times. In practice, many different challenges occurred on any given day, so having pre-set interviews would not necessarily be the best way to work. After discussions, the specific timeframes of 3.00–5.00pm Monday to Thursday and all day Fridays were earmarked for the interviews. These were confirmed each day in the early afternoon via email, allowing for the required level of flexibility, but still allowing for planned time. Aware of the partner’s ‘situational dictates and pressures’ (Van Maanen 2011, p. 220), the researcher rearranged planning and other commitments, to hold these spots for interviews. Because of the strong relationshipwork already undertaken, an effective short hand style developed as changes were communicated very quickly via text message. Consequently, in spite of the contingencies of this arrangement, interviews were efficiently completed.

Early in the project, the need for a reference group was agreed upon by the researchers and school leaders. The invitations extended were readily accepted. Given the independent nature of the study, it might appear constraining for this sort of assistance to be sought. However, the knowledge and expertise of those in the reference group is significant for the study. The overall aim of strengthening educational connections for young people in youth justice is shared by the school, the researchers and members of the reference group. Individuals approached to join this group were proposed by the school leaders and the researchers, drawing upon existing networks, previous collaborations and knowledge of the field. Members include individuals from government departments, the court system, and philanthropic, advocacy and community organisations. This participation demonstrates interest and support for the study, providing the researchers and the school leaders with sustaining encouragement. The work and knowledge of these individuals provide valuable policy and system-level perspectives to the study, and, at its conclusion, the study is expected to deliver useful and thoughtful advice to these individual members of the reference group and the youth justice sector about how education in the lives of the young people can be strengthened. This partnership is also built upon foundations of relationshipwork and continues to develop.

2: Working with Gatekeepers

Given the timing of this study, and the inclement weather at its inception, it was inevitable that close scrutiny would occur; after all, we were seeking permission to undertake research in a field that was not only highly sensitive but in which the media had exercised undue negative influence. Challenges to government department decisions were being made in the courts, and politicians were frequently questioned about youth justice. Everyone was nervous. We proposed interviewing vulnerable minors held in custody, many of whom had not been convicted but held on remand.

The old fashioned term 'gatekeeper' is a suitable one used here to refer to the ethics committees and government departments. It aptly describes those whose decision it is to grant, or not grant, access to our research field (Homan 2001) and implies an ethics of care approach (Brooks, te Riele & Maguire 2014) aimed at protecting participants. Without approval from the various gatekeepers, the project would not have been able to get off the ground.

The approval process required to undertake this research was extensive, involving the preparation of eight separate but overlapping lengthy documents. At each ethics committee meeting more concerns were raised and more revisions were required. It took fifteen months to gain all required approvals to conduct the fieldwork. Relationshipwork was undertaken with staff and chairs of Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs) and with government department officials who manage the approvals processes. Telephone calls were made and meetings were held. Draft documents were prepared, and advice was provided and accepted. Electronic systems were navigated, and there was goodwill and collegiality throughout. To accompany these applications for approval, letters from key gatekeepers were also required. Senior officials generously supported the project by repeatedly providing positive letters of support in time for submission. Relationshipwork played a major role here. This aspect of research is rarely listed in the many books that advise how research should be undertaken.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that developing strong relationships is an important precursor to research being able to be undertaken. The concept of relationshipwork as an integral part of the research process has been introduced in this article. Contextual information about the funded project has been introduced. However, the significant argument being forwarded here is that it is the interactions and relationships developed between stakeholders and researchers that allow the research to proceed. Relationshipwork, as we have argued in this paper, is not only a requirement for substantial and useful research but has been conceptualised here as a necessary fourth element to the three 'tasks' of research identified by Van Maanen (1988; 2011): fieldwork, headwork and textwork. The contribution of this paper, therefore, is the illustration of how maintaining and sustaining relationships with partners, gatekeepers and stakeholders conceptualises, establishes, negotiates and improves research. Indeed, it is through this relationshipwork that research is able to be realised.

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