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## Community Gatekeepers: Power, Pitfalls and Possibilities When Recruiting and Researching Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Participants

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### Abstract

Using data from a large primarily qualitative research project on how people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities experience and access health services, this methodological article focuses on the role of the community gatekeeper – a role that has significance for research teams globally when attempting to involve those facing multiple forms of exclusion. Drawing on standpoint feminist principles and using a reflexive approach, researcher positionality, situated knowledges, and the power dynamics between researchers, participants, and community gatekeepers are reflected upon. Addressing a gap in the literature by providing real-life examples of the power and influence of gatekeepers at all stages of the research process, the findings reveal: the extent to which gatekeepers of research with BAME participants are facilitative or obstructive during the research process; how they affect processes such as the recruitment of participants, access to community venues, the conduct of the research interview, and the dissemination of findings; and finally, the implications for future research with so called “hard-to-reach” groups.

### Keywords

qualitative research, gatekeepers, recruiting and researching BAME participants, power, opportunities, pitfalls

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# Community Gatekeepers: Power, Pitfalls and Possibilities When Recruiting and Researching Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Participants

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Using data from a large primarily qualitative research project on how people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities experience and access health services, this methodological article focuses on the role of the community gatekeeper – a role that has significance for research teams globally when attempting to involve those facing multiple forms of exclusion. Drawing on standpoint feminist principles and using a reflexive approach, researcher positionality, situated knowledges, and the power dynamics between researchers, participants, and community gatekeepers are reflected upon. Addressing a gap in the literature by providing real-life examples of the power and influence of gatekeepers at all stages of the research process, the findings reveal: the extent to which gatekeepers of research with BAME participants are facilitative or obstructive during the research process; how they affect processes such as the recruitment of participants, access to community venues, the conduct of the research interview, and the dissemination of findings; and finally, the implications for future research with so called “hard-to-reach” groups.

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## Introduction

*“It really annoys me that people say the hard-to-reach areas [BAME communities] ... actually they’re not, they are there, it’s just making sure you understand how to go and reach them” (Stakeholder 1 = SH01).* This quote is from a commissioner of health services for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. It reveals how the statement, “hard-to-reach” problematises BAME people (Jutlla & Raghavan, 2017) when attempting to provide them services and or involve them in various activities, including research. Despite this problematisation, there are ways of “knowing,” and critically, ways of “doing,” that can empower the researcher, researched, and groups/organisations that are worked with. This is particularly pertinent due to the underrepresentation of BAME people in various sectors of social research (Jutlla & Raghavan, 2017; Rugkåsa & Canvin, 2011; SRA, 2020).

This reflexive article is based on a qualitative research study (conducted 2015 – 2016) involving BAME communities in a large city in the Midlands, UK. It focuses on the role of the community gatekeeper – a role that has significance for research teams globally when attempting to involve those facing multiple forms of exclusion (Aroian et al., 2006; Sullivan, 2020). Community gatekeepers are usually of the communities that they represent, holding a deep understanding of their social, cultural, and political backdrop (de Laine, 2000). They can be an elected community leader or work in a less formal capacity to serve the needs of their local community. Community organisations led by gatekeepers are used by local members of

the community, particularly BAME people for specific support due to lack of education, limited knowledge of mainstream systems, language barriers, and low social and cultural capital.

Sixsmith et al. (2003) acknowledge that gatekeepers can both aid and block access to research participants and might attempt to push forward their own agendas and potentially influence research. Whilst this is plausible, Sixsmith et al. do not provide real-life examples of any influence. It is this gap in the literature that this article seeks to address. Its main objective is to consider the power and influence of gatekeepers at all stages of the research process by asking the following research questions:

- To what extent are gatekeepers of research with BAME participants facilitative or obstructive during the research process?
- How do they affect processes such as the recruitment of participants, access to community venues, the conduct of the research interview, and the dissemination of findings?
- What are the implications for future research with so called “hard-to-reach” groups?

### **Literature Review**

With focus on the “community gatekeeper,” a wealth of literature was reviewed covering subjects such as the difficulties of reaching and engaging BAME people in research; methods for improving the participation of those hard to engage in research; standpoint feminist principles of research; and reflexivity and power dynamics. Of note, discussion of some of the literature is dispersed in other sections in addition to this one, including in the methodology and findings, wherever it was considered most relevant, and is therefore not repeated here.

The challenges of recruiting and researching people from BAME communities are well-documented. Concerns related to trust in researchers, their motivations for doing the research, and how the results might be (mis)used (Das, 2010; Yancey et al., 2006) act as barriers to involvement. Issues related to modesty stemming from cultural and religious values, unsuitable methods, and methodological practices such as the length and complexity of research questions all act as barriers to participation (Jutlla & Raghavan, 2017; Morville & Erlandsson, 2016) for BAME communities, particularly those experiencing language barriers (Berg, 1999). By adopting pragmatic approaches – identifying people (gatekeepers) that local communities trust; finding venues that are perceived safe, quiet, and easily accessed by participants – researchers can fail to consider the methodological issues and potential power dynamics within them.

The presence of power in the research process has increasingly received attention in scholarly literature (see Clark & Sinclair, 2008; Eide & Allen, 2005; Harding & Norberg, 2005). Elwood and Martin (2000) report that critical reflections on methodology in the social sciences have revealed power hierarchies embedded in various characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and race and other social differences. Moreover, a burgeoning literature examines the power exercised by gatekeepers when attempting to access research participants from minority ethnic communities (Eide & Allen, 2005; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Rugkåsa & Canvin, 2011; Yancey et al., 2006).

Community gatekeepers are usually representatives of, and support, the communities that they themselves are from, thus possessing a rich understanding of the socio-cultural, political, and religious norms, values, and practices of their local community members. It is the power and influence of gatekeepers at all stages of the research process that this study seeks to explore, consequently addressing a major gap in scholarly literature on the role of gatekeeper in research. The challenges and successes of gaining cooperation from community gatekeepers are recounted by researchers (Aroian et al., 2006; Sullivan, 2020) internationally, and when

examining the involvement of gatekeepers in research, academic literature (see Clark, 2011; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Sixsmith et al., 2003) has focused on access to and recruitment of research participants - any gatekeeper involvement outside of this remit has been neglected. Further, Davies and Peters (2014) report that in social research, the role of gatekeepers in ethnographic research has received more attention than their role within organisations. Indeed, gatekeepers often mediate access for researchers into community sites and to research participants, particularly, those whose voices are seldom heard (Emmel et al., 2007; McAreavey & Das, 2013;) but, as I found during this study and emphasise in this article, they offer a great deal more which potentially enhances research practice.

Few studies identify the wider benefits of gatekeeper involvement in research; for example, it has been suggested that “*gatekeepers introduce the researcher to new sources of information and consideration of new ways of looking at the issues being researched*” (Davies & Peters, 2014, pp. 37-38) although real-life examples of how their ideas and contributions shape scholarly research are scarce. This study aims to narrow this gap in knowledge by providing through examples, insights into the multifarious role of gatekeepers in research, and the new sources of information they bring to research processes.

### **Role and Position of Researcher**

Both the role and positionality of the researcher require careful consideration in relation to potential influence on the research process – a fundamental concern of feminist research (Linabary & Hamel, 2017). With reflexivity (attention to my own biases, privilege etc.) at the heart of the research, I was conscious of the following pertinent issues: firstly, as principal investigator, I possessed the power to make key decisions about so many aspects of the research, such as where and how to access research participants. Secondly, my identity (and those of other researchers) potentially influenced participation and the responses received, but also potentially introduced power relations, perhaps inadvertently excluding some people from the research.

As someone from a minority ethnic background, I have experienced racism, sexism, and poverty, and whilst my lived experience of poverty lives only in my memory, other aspects of disadvantage live on. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that people from the BAME communities involved in my various research projects, including that on which this article is based, have a high level of identification with me. My education and career, for example, could reasonably be perceived as setting me apart from those I consider my counterparts.

In line with my own values, the theoretical basis of this article draws on standpoint feminist principles of social research which challenge the traditional androcentric, colonial, and sexist assumptions on which knowledge making has historically relied (Harding, 1991) and the unattainable scientific pursuit of objectivity. Whilst standpoint feminist epistemology places “*women at the center of the research process*” (Brooks, 2007, p. 56), I adapted this to take BAME peoples’ (men and women’s) experiences as a starting point. There is merit in drawing on standpoint principles, as BAME people, including BAME men, experience marginalisation and exclusion from multiple arenas, not necessarily in the same ways or due to the same reasons as women, but nevertheless their “voices” have been omitted in the construction of knowledge. For example, despite Black men experiencing inequalities in education and in the labour market compared to their White counterparts and being overrepresented in mental health services and the criminal justice system (Brown, 2021), their voices on matters such as mental health are largely unexplored and unheard (Watkins, 2019). I am, however, acutely aware of gender (and race) and multiple-disadvantage, and do not intend to downplay its significance. Instead, the rationale for this study is to expose the power, inequalities, and complexities in social research through reflection and self-critique (Roberts,

1981), paying attention to the positioning and situated (social, cultural, historical) knowledges of the various actors involved in the research.

## Methodology

### *Method*

The study (on which this article is based) aimed to better understand the barriers and enabling factors to the uptake of health services in a broad range of BAME communities and involved research with BAME community members and stakeholders from across the local NHS and voluntary and community sector (see Bashir, et al., 2016). Qualitative research was used to unearth and understand peoples' experiences and social practices (Silverman, 2020). Having established themes for exploration from a prior systematic literature review, semi-structured face-to-face qualitative interviews were deemed most suitable for giving participants the freedom to discuss issues of importance to them, allowing researchers the opportunity to pursue unanticipated lines of inquiry to produce new knowledge in relation to the study (Brinkmann, 2014). Consistent with standpoint feminist principles, this method provides participants the opportunity to be heard through expression of their "*ideas, thoughts and experiences*" (Ikonen & Ojala, 2007, p. 82), which is well-suited to the study objectives.

### *Sampling Strategy and Recruitment of Research Participants*

In total, 86 people participated in the interviews: 17 stakeholders providing strategic insights into their organisational roles, remits in relation to long-term conditions (LTCs) and their views on BAME experiences; and 69 BAME community members, 42 of whom had accessed LTCs services for their condition and 27 who had only received care through their general practitioner or specialist nurse.

Firstly, working with the research steering group (from the NHS), seven key BAME voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations (representing a cross-section of BAME communities from within the city) were identified to approach for stakeholder interviews and for the recruitment of participants with LTCs. Connections within the NHS quickly facilitated the recruitment of key stakeholders employed by the NHS and VCS stakeholders.

When interviews with the VCS leaders were completed, they were asked for assistance recruiting BAME participants with LTCs. Equipped with knowledge about the aims of the study, what participation would involve, timescales for the research, the proposed location of the research, and participant criteria for involvement, those community leaders quickly brokered access to their service users, setting up some of the interviews themselves by telephoning people on their databases or sharing research information in-person. Researchers then visited the organisations on days when a good turnout of BAME people was expected (due to events and activities) to conduct pre-arranged interviews and on a "drop-in" basis.

Importantly, I was able to utilise my position as principal investigator and "insider" status to negotiate access to participants through gatekeepers. This insider status included linguistic and cultural commonalities, but also knowledge and experience of the local communities and place, as a previous resident and having worked as a practitioner in one of the BAME community organisations involved in the study. In this role I had worked closely with other BAME organisations and was able to use this familiarity to get "buy-in" and cooperation from them for access to participants and research sites.

To ensure the representation of men and women from a range of BAME communities, other gatekeepers were approached for assistance with recruitment. Some of those gatekeepers were more difficult to involve in the research and the challenges encountered are examined in

the findings. Two organisations suggested using their local community radios to transmit information about the research to ensure a wider reach / representation of BAME people in the study. Again, the effectiveness of this method forms a substantive part of the findings – discussed in the first part of the “Key Findings” section.

### ***Ethical Issues***

When attempting to recruit research participants from communities where researchers did not have existing connections or possess the necessary language skills, a lack of trust and reluctance to participate emerged as a significant practical and ethical issue within a couple of communities whose involvement necessitated the presence/involvement of their local gatekeepers. This was explained as a “*culture thing, they don’t want to tell people [whom they do not know] their problem*” (SH02), and such reservations were echoed in earlier research conducted by Edwards (2013). Although professional interpreters were available to support the research, a preference was expressed by potential participants for gatekeepers to be involved in the interviewing. After some deliberation, it was decided that gatekeepers would be used as interpreters (for 14 interviews), as the ethical dilemmas of using gatekeepers (biases, promoting own agendas, power dynamics etc.) were outweighed by the research team’s commitment to an inclusive approach to the research, principally concerned with hearing the voices of those seldom heard (Agyeman, 2008) and less so for pragmatic reasons. In line with feminist principles, an attempt was made to avoid “*reproducing unequal power relations and reinforcing the researcher’s epistemic authority*” (Linabary & Hamel, 2017) by pursuing a methodological approach to “interpretation” that participants were uncomfortable with. In cases where gatekeepers were used as interpreters, they were fully briefed of the research and their role ahead of the interviews. How these interactions played out and the learning taken from them is discussed in the main body of the article.

### ***Data Collection***

To maximise the prospects of engaging with diverse BAME communities (including African, Caribbean, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, and Polish), a multilingual research team was mobilised with the requisite language skills (speaking at least seven different languages between them) and cultural and religious knowledge to conduct most of the interviews.

In line with a semi-structured approach, a topic guide was developed with questions (and probes) covering a range of pertinent themes corresponding with the study aims (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). The researchers familiarised themselves with this guide before commencing the interviews to allow the interviews to flow. Ahead of the interviews, participants were provided written information about the study. To overcome barriers to informed consent encountered by people with low literacy (Bonevski et al., 2014), study information was translated and or verbally interpreted for those unable to read and or write and or understand English. Having gained consent, interviews were undertaken face-to-face in community venues for comfort and familiarity and lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. Each interview was recorded using an encrypted digital recorder ensuring data protection (Knight, 2018) and transcribed verbatim. This recorded information gleaned during the researcher – participant discussion (i.e., interviews) constituted research data.

## **Data Analysis**

NVivo software was used for qualitative data analysis to simplify the traditional task of colour coding and or cutting and pasting data under relevant themes during analysis (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). First, a coding framework was developed (Roberts et al., 2019) based on key themes identified in an earlier literature review and on themes emerging from the interviews. The code “language” for example, included references in interview data to low English language skills, use of interpreters/translated material, illiteracy in mother tongue, etc. Then, the transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo and two researchers collaboratively analysed and coded data to the themes – looking across all the data for patterns, in behaviour, experience, views and so on – creating new codes, if necessary, in relation to the research question.

## **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

Plausibly, the use of multilingual researchers improved quality and rigor through less reliance on translators and interpreters, who, in some instances through lack of competence, could have introduced bias by incorrectly relaying or translating information, possibly affecting the credibility of the study (Squires, 2009), a finding that is explored later in this article.

Conversely, the closeness of researchers to the research subject and/or their “insider” positions in participants’ communities was also considered as potentially compromising objectivity and introducing bias, and therefore, peer review (by a senior academic and steering group) of research questions and written outputs ensured rigor and trustworthiness.

The collaborative approach to developing a coding framework with another member of the research team during the data analysis process also improved reliability, with both researchers working closely to determine that accurate codes were identified for the developing themes (Roberts, et al., 2019).

Compliance to the university’s rigorous ethics process, with principles of avoiding harm, research integrity and rigor were satisfied to gain approval from the university’s ethics committee. Further, ongoing reflection and reflexivity throughout the research process and subsequently, (Nyathi, 2018) underpinned the trustworthiness of this study.

## **Key Findings**

### ***The Community Gatekeeper: Facilitative or Obstructive?***

Several gatekeepers facilitated access to community organisations and BAME research participants, living locally. Yet, as principal investigator, my ongoing reflexive concern prompted the need for a deeper reach into the BAME communities, particularly as earlier stakeholder interviews had highlighted the need to seek out the views of those especially hard-to-reach, as “*people who are going to community centres are not always the ones that have something crucial to add, [it is] the really hard-to-reach*” (SH03).

Recognising that the representation of a diverse range of BAME communities in the research required more than the usual access through community organisations where select people might be put forward for interviews, the research team developed a broader recruitment strategy in consultation with two gatekeepers from different communities who had access to their service users and a range of other means to access wider populations. Both proposed using local community radio stations as supplementary communication channels for the recruitment of participants, conveying “*messages in their own languages*” (SH04) – reinforcing a point made by a professional in another stakeholder interview: “*If the message which is being given*



*out is in a manner that is not relevant to the recipient, they're not going to receive it, so the problem becomes worse when it's not culturally specific, not language specific" (SH07).*

With a large listenership, these radio stations aired numerous programmes in the various languages spoken by the local community. The value of this method was reported by a professional who had previously used it for a health campaign: *"you might want to cover something on the radio within that community... it's [the local radio] been successful and it was effective, we were able to see an increased uptake [of services by BAME communities]" (SH05).*

The research team worked closely with one of the gatekeepers to develop a script for a radio programme and short adverts (in appropriate languages) about the research and how to get involved. Delivered in a widely spoken community language, a multilingual radio presenter (who had been briefed in advance) invited listeners to phone-in and share their experiences of the subject under investigation. Whilst the programme was aired "live," the adverts were pre-recorded utilising radio presenters and were played routinely in-between community programmes over several days. A social media advert about the forthcoming radio programme was also circulated by the gatekeeper to all members of the community organisation. These methods captured the attention of community members who then elected to participate in the qualitative interviews scheduled to take part in the community centre several days later.

Fundamentally, it was the community gatekeepers who enhanced the recruitment strategy with their knowledge, guidance on simplifying materials, and facilitating access to a means of communication that had a wider reach into BAME communities and to those who were not necessarily affiliated with specific community organisations. Although exact numbers were not recorded, by far the largest number of people were recruited from the communities engaged through the broader recruitment strategy of utilising the gatekeeper's existing contacts, repeated radio adverts, a "live" radio programme, and social media. Further, during interviews, at least eight participants reported that they listened to local community radio. In one example, when asked about the most effective method for sharing information, the participant confirmed, *"I think it might be radio which goes [is listened to] in every house"* (participant 1 = P01). Another participant reiterated, *"doing some programmes on community radio, all community is listening, Indian, Pakistani, Kashmiri. It would be a direct approach and quite helpful"* (P02).

Although gatekeepers can facilitate access to research participants, the potential for them to obstruct access to members of "their community" is also commonly discussed. Clark (2011) emphasises a gap in knowledge in the research community as to the reasons behind this gatekeeper-researcher relationship. In this study, when reflecting on why gatekeepers blocked access, several explanations were identified based on two real-life examples, as outlined below.

First, as part of the project, I attended an awareness event for a particular community with the aim of recruiting community leaders and professionals for stakeholder interviews – neither the research steering group nor I had existing contacts in this community. It was intended that some of these stakeholders would help widen access to individuals from specific communities for participant interviews. Engagement with these communities was crucial to ensuring representation of their views and experiences in the research. However, the research plans temporarily became unstuck when the key community leader refused to engage with the research due to his cynicism about whether participation would influence the commissioning of services to the benefit of his community. He firmly shut down the conversation and my attempts to negotiate access to participants based on giving individuals "choice" to share their views were in vain.

In a second example, as a part of the research recruitment strategy, a local organisation with a large community following was targeted to ensure adequate representation of men and women from a specific community. However, numerous attempts (by email and telephone) to

have an initial conversation with the main gatekeeper proved unsuccessful. In both examples, I did not have any prior experience of working with the organisations or “*opportunities to develop commonalities*” (McAreevey & Das, 2013, p. 12). I was, however, aware of the local politics and friction caused by the scarcity of and competition for funding. Although the lack of cooperation may have been due to a lack of organisational capacity to be involved (Din & Cullingford, 2004), these cases presented compelling examples of how gatekeepers (mis)use their power to prevent the flow of information and deny their communities choice by refusing to participate in research.

Whilst previous unkept promises about the impact of consultation or research with local communities on organisations’ funding or service provision might be reasons for distrust and not engaging (Age Better in Sheffield, 2019), the personal politics between gatekeepers should not be underestimated (Edwards, 2013). Such politics might be influenced by competition for funding, differing values and beliefs and gatekeepers’ personal interests. As one professional commented during her interview,

*I feel there’s a lot of politics attached to that as well and I feel there’s lots of people [community gatekeepers] who wouldn’t want the communities to develop that far cos there’s going to be change as to regard to their roles as well (SH03).*

Indeed, Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert (2008) assert that although gatekeepers represent community concerns, they are also influenced by their own interests. The discord between some gatekeepers was present during my previous community work in diverse communities where it became apparent that different factions of communities aligned themselves with particular gatekeepers (community leaders) and their politics, and this was present in this research too – underscored in a stakeholder account: “*the same with priests [imams], I think people who are very strong in their religious beliefs will follow a certain group or mosque*” (SH03). This alliance had a bearing on the places the different factions accessed, what they got involved in, and even which days religious festivals were observed.

### ***Using Gatekeepers as Interpreters***

As highlighted earlier, community gatekeepers were used as interpreters for 14 interviews and this approach had clear benefits. Importantly, the research participants had trust in these gatekeepers, and this was important given that some interviews later revealed individuals’ lack of trust in professional interpreters. Furthermore, the research team did not have to draw in additional resources, and most crucially, were able to hear the experiences of those rarely heard in research. Still, this approach had some drawbacks. For instance, when used as interpreters during interviews, in several cases, gatekeepers answered questions on behalf of the research participants as they held knowledge about them and of their circumstances. During one of the interviews when a participant was asked his age, the interpreter responded: “*He’s saying XXXX [age given by participant] but his birthdays in June so he’s XXXX [actual age]*” (P03). It became clear that the gatekeepers had not understood the remit of their role, that is, to interpret the questions and relay the answers word-for-word. In one example, the interviewer asked the participant (via the interpreter) how often he accessed the community organisation, only to receive the following response from the interpreter: “*He always come here I think, nearly every week*” (P04).

Later, the interviewer asked the participant (via the interpreter) whether he knew where to go for support. Again, the interpreter answered the question on his behalf, instead offering

her own view of his situation, and her (& the organisation's) aim to assist him: *"I said to him I can talk to the GP...I think there's no help with appointments"* (P04).

In another interview, when asked about her financial situation, the interpreter not only answered on the participant's behalf but also breached confidentiality (like the earlier "age" example) by divulging the participant's personal financial situation which she was aware of, but information the participant might not have wanted to share with the researcher: *"She got not much money at the moment...we [as an organisation] helped her apply for the pension and she's still waiting for it so she don't have the money at the moment"* (P05).

Here we also learnt about the type of support the gatekeeper's organisation was providing the participant with, and it is this type of support that might influence participation in the research in the first place – due to the individual feeling indebted to the gatekeeper and their organisation.

In only one case, was there evidence of a gatekeeper (as interpreter) providing answers that could perhaps be construed as the gatekeeper pushing their own organisation's agenda forward, for example, to secure funding for services:

- I Do you feel like you need any additional support to help you manage...?  
 P No, maybe if you have some group.  
 G Maybe we can make a XXXX group in here and do exercise in here.  
 P Yeah exercise (P06).

Where gatekeepers were used as interpreters, participant responses were more basic compared to those interviews that solely relied on experienced researchers. Developing rapport during interviews using interpreters as an intermediary proved difficult. Whilst good rapport and the feminist ideals of open, free discussion during interviews (Ikonen & Ojala, 2007) might lead to participants divulging more, the trade-off here was having some information rather than no information about the specific communities that were reluctant to be involved. In one community setting there seemed to be an urgency (in the interpreters) to complete the interviews as quickly as possible, perhaps due to other organisational commitments. Consequently, interviews were rushed through at speed and questions were pre-empted by the interpreters, preventing exploratory questions. Reminders in-between interviews on the importance of interpreting verbatim and allowing participants adequate time to respond were futile.

Conversely, the experience of using gatekeepers as interpreters differed enormously when working with another organisation. The gatekeeper grasped key guidance on how to pace the interviews and accurately relay questions and answers. Adequate time had been committed to the entire task and in between individual interviews, in line with the brief. Gatekeeper input was invaluable for engaging people from a community that firstly researchers would have struggled to reach and secondly, convince to participate in the research.

### ***Cultural Competence of Gatekeepers***

The cultural competence of community gatekeepers and how it can aid the efforts of research teams became apparent during the research with BAME communities. The term "cultural competence" is broadly defined, but within the context of this research it is best described as *"a dynamic process with five major constructs: cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skills, cultural encounters, and cultural desire"* (Suh et al., 2009, p. 195). It is mentioned fleetingly but rarely explored in-depth in methodological articles (except Campinha-Bacote, 2002; Suh et al., 2009), yet, to ensure rigor in qualitative research with BAME communities it should inform the entire process from research design, to doing the

research, and finally, the dissemination of findings. It is key to facilitating access to participants, particularly those underrepresented in research (Harvard Catalyst, 2010) and ensures ethical research practice in terms of informed consent, nonmaleficence, and power balances.

The cultural awareness and knowledge, linguistic skills, and experience of routinely working with specific BAME communities of community gatekeepers (McAreavey & Das, 2013) should not be undervalued by research teams. The extent of this competence gained through inherent and lived experience was conveyed in a stakeholder account:

*I've been employed by the XXXX [name of organisation] since XXXX [date] but I think some of that experience doesn't just come from my work, I've been involved in sitting on committees for a lot of community groups over the years and it's given me a big insight into how the community works and also just to be part of that community myself..., I have a diverse background, my parents come from [country of origin]...and I've been there and seen people in their own surroundings and that gave me a better insight as to how they were [living] here (SH03).*

Textbook-informed cultural competence is unlikely to have the desired outcomes for non-BAME research teams and their participants. For example, when planning fieldwork, research teams discuss avoiding any clash with cultural or religious observances of participants and when researching Muslim communities particularly avoiding Friday - the holiest day of the week when Muslims pray in congregation. Whilst this is a culturally sensitive approach, it is not necessarily an “informed” one. Close communication with gatekeepers might conversely reveal that this particular day might be conducive to research activity and convenient to Muslim participants who are perhaps more likely to use the community venue for prayers on Fridays and be available before and after prayers to participate in the research. Certainly, my “insider” knowledge from previous work in a BAME community setting suggested Friday would be a day when women from Muslim communities would meet for prayers and luncheon club, followed by free time until family members would provide a lift home, or the centre would close. In this sense, it was an ideal opportunity to recruit and interview women for research.

The “five major constructs” of cultural competence were reflected in the account of a BAME stakeholder relaying her experience of recruiting people for educational courses and is relevant to recruiting BAME people for research purposes. In this example, English groups independently investigated, and took up the courses, whereas people from Asian groups had to be encouraged, perhaps due to lack of knowledge due to poor language skills. The stakeholder reported, “with Asian groups it's almost persuading them and talking to them and trying to get through how important it [the course] is” (SH03). Based on her knowledge of and encounters with BAME people, she was aware of other practicalities when attempting to recruit such groups:

*We also ring people before their session each week which we don't do with the English groups, bearing in mind that we've got communities that are not very literate, that won't have diaries and remember dates and times, often some...rely on family members to bring them in (SH03).*

A similar approach was used by several gatekeepers working with the research team. Centre staff made reminder calls in relevant languages to potential participants and clearly played a role in “encouraging” involvement in the research. In such instances, the level of gatekeeper assistance exceeded the expectations of the research team.

It was on the advice of one gatekeeper that the research team held a stall at a religious celebration to recruit research participants from the Chinese community; a community rarely heard in previous research projects on our topic. Researchers manning the stall provided translated materials (produced with support from the gatekeeper) on the proposed research. No doubt the “cultural skills” of this gatekeeper ensured accuracy of the language used in the research publicity poster, being mindful that “*some words possibly in other languages might not translate that well*” (SH05); that is, some words when translated from English into a different language can lose, or take on a different meaning (Suh et al., 2009). The research information, in simplified language, was also added to the organisational newsletter and, wherever possible, the gatekeeper introduced potential participants to the researchers and explained the study. The level of trust that community members had in the gatekeeper was pivotal to them speaking to the researchers in the first place. A different gatekeeper commented that, “*that comes from a relationship, or at the very least recommendation from people that you already know and trust that it’s going to be ok, you can talk to this person*” (SH06). Essentially, some gatekeepers helped broker relationships based on the trust they had built with community members over many years.

Again, when disseminating the research findings, gatekeepers played a key role in organising the sessions by inviting those who had participated in the research, providing transport, ensuring culturally appropriate food was provided, interpreting the findings presented by the researcher, and facilitating discussion around those findings. Costs related to dissemination activities were covered by the research team, however, gatekeepers enabled the team’s “acts of reciprocity” – something which is encouraged by feminist researchers as attempts to equalise relationships of power in researcher participant relationships (Oakley, 1981).

Pertinent to this study, were the social relationships between gatekeepers, participants, and then researchers. As Oakley (1981) highlighted, social and personal characteristics (ethnicity, race, gender, etc.) are integral to such social relationships and as evidenced through this study, vital to learning lessons about engaging with and researching marginalised groups. Race, and situated socio-cultural and historical knowledge, previously ignored in relation to knowledge-making in the social sciences, all proved significant (Collins, 1990) for creating relationships of trust and understanding. As Dean (2017, p. 78) asserts, “*being reflexively aware of one’s competences and the gaps in one’s knowledge is vital.*” Certainly, whilst the research team possessed skills and knowledge appropriate to researching several BAME communities, there were significant gaps in knowledge on how to work effectively with a couple of communities and these gaps were plugged by the gatekeepers.

### ***Gatekeepers in Community Centres***

The interviews revealed that the community centres used as research sites were accessed for many purposes including education, health services, fitness activities, welfare advice and guidance, communal prayers, social interaction and mutual support, and assistance with interpretation, and translation. However, significant cuts in local authority funding had impacted on the level of services and activities provided and some organisations were operating on minimal resources. With this knowledge and commitment to ethical practice, as principal investigator, I had budgeted from the outset for hire of community centres, refreshments during interviews, staff time organising the interviews, food for dissemination events, and any other unexpected services or support, which did eventually include some interpretation and the creation and delivery of radio adverts. Inadvertently, the research team leveraged gatekeeper power by budgeting for costs which demonstrated a commitment to working closely with them,

being respectful of their constraints, and valuing their contributions, which ultimately won their trust and ensured good research outcomes (Edwards, 2013).

In the research context, the gatekeeper (with staff) and community organisation site were inextricably linked, in that both were necessary to provide local community members with culturally appropriate services and information, in safe places, located in the heart of the communities served. A community leader stressed, *“everyone feels more comfortable with places that they know and there are other people they know there. So, familiarity and continuity are definite plus points in terms of engaging people, and people that are called hard-to-reach”* (SH06). This offering draws members of local communities to specific places and sustains engagement. Whilst the role of gatekeepers in research was examined, the attachment with, and trust of local communities in, such people and places were also evidenced in the research.

Several accounts evidenced the impact of such places and people on wellbeing; for example, a participant reported, *“It makes me very happy like when I come here [to the community centre] for yoga – it makes me feel very relaxed”* (P07). Similarly, the research team attempted to create a comforting and welcoming ambiance by providing refreshments and adopting a relaxed approach to conducting the research. With many years of experience in community settings behind me, I intuitively adapted to the community worker-researcher role.

As researchers, we did not have to go to lengths to win the trust of most community members. In fact, the term “borrowed trust” best describes the relationship, whereby the trust (between participant-gatekeepers) was borrowed by researchers from gatekeepers. So strong was the influence of the gatekeeper in one case that a queue of people from the local South Asian community waited to be interviewed at a particular centre.

### ***Ethics and Power***

Reflexive practice enriches learning, potentially widens access to research participants, particularly those marginalised, enhances the experience of those researched and those who conduct the research, and possibly improves the quality of data and research findings (Dean, 2017; Linabary & Hamel, 2017). Power, therefore, real or perceived, and how it might manifest in qualitative research with BAME people should not be an afterthought or overlooked in studies such as this.

It could be argued that the commonalities between our research team and gatekeepers based on race, language, culture, etc. minimised the power differences between us (McAreavey & Das, 2013) but to be genuinely reflexive, the potential power held by researchers over participants and gatekeepers should not be ignored. Although identification in some cases might have helped overcome cultural, religious, and language barriers, differences in education and potentially being viewed as “experts” (Frost & Elichaooff, 2014) might have introduced power dynamics. In one interview, a participant’s perception of me compared to other females from my ethnic background underscored the point about “difference” in his comment, *“first time I see Mirpuri girl in English clothing, I used to work with many, very strict and they’re really not supposed to work...”* (P08). Perhaps I was perceived to be in a position of power due to breaking convention, building a career, and adopting western ways.

Conversely, power could have been perceived to have shifted from researcher to gatekeeper during the stage when the research team were dependent on gatekeepers for interpretation – a point stressed by Edwards (2013) during her study: *“interpreters have control during the actual fieldwork process, with academic researchers reliant on them”* (p. 512).

As acknowledged earlier, the research was conducted against a backdrop of heavy cuts in public funding, causing community organisations to fold or operate on skeleton workforces. Although intended for ethical reasons, payment for staff time, venue hire, interpretation/translation services, and so on, perhaps inadvertently introduced a power relation

whereby the financial incentives offered by the research team could conceivably have prompted gatekeeper engagement with the research in the first place and thereafter. Whilst conducted for the benefit of the local communities, there were no firm assurances of the research informing any tangible change.

Secondly, although small, the £10 gift for participation in the interviews should also be considered (ethically and in relation to researcher power) as not necessarily incentivising but obliging those from deprived communities to take part. Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert (2008) reflected on whether such incentives were concerned with “buying” research rather than participants actively “choosing” to be involved in the research to influence and benefit a particular cause. They justified incentivisation based on difficulty in accessing research participants and whilst this was not the intention of the “£10 gift” for participation in my research, when news travelled locally about the monetary gift, it clearly had a bearing on the numbers of people willing to participate. Indeed, in informal discussion after their interviews, a few participants expressed appreciation for the money which they stated would be used for purchasing food.

The ethics of gatekeepers could be questioned in denying local community members “choice” by blocking access to research opportunities, and where access is enabled, gatekeepers obliging (intentionally or inadvertently) members from their local communities to take part in research. The ethical principle of “consent” in research becomes tenuous in scenarios where participants feel that non-participation might impact on or affect the service(s) and support they receive, or when participation is deemed a way of “giving something back” to the gatekeeper to whom they feel indebted. Arising from reflexive practice are numerous plausible scenarios, all embedded in complex relations of power.

## Discussion

Using evidence from a large empirical study involving BAME communities, this article has argued that gatekeepers need not play the limited role in research with communities that might be (incorrectly) defined as “hard-to-reach.” Previously, scholarly literature has been polarised in describing gatekeepers as either aiding or obstructing the recruitment of research participants (Emmel et al., 2007; McAreavey & Das, 2013; Sixsmith et al., 2003). However, this article addresses a significant gap in the evidence base around qualitative methodology by revealing the multifarious role of gatekeepers in “knowledge making” and highlights that their skills and expertise should not be ignored or underestimated. Notably, in this study the gatekeepers were from marginalised backgrounds themselves and possessed a strong desire to support those on the margins of society due to their race, gender, class, etc. The feminist lens applied through this article has enabled me to capture the contribution of those sometimes overlooked or portrayed in a one-dimensional light – in this case, community gatekeepers.

An abundance of possibilities for research using gatekeepers (their expertise and skills) emerged from this study that should directly benefit research participants, the research team, and the groups or organisations of gatekeepers themselves. Firstly, gatekeeper reach into BAME communities based on identification and trust ensured representation of those communities usually on the margins in research, allowing voices of BAME participants to be heard. Previous research highlighted a lack of understanding of and a mistrust in research studies as leading to BAME peoples’ reluctance to participate (Jutlla & Raghavan, 2017; Morville & Erlandsson, 2016), whereas this study found a potential solution in the community gatekeeper – as key in brokering trust and improving understanding between BAME people and research teams, providing important lessons of international significance for how the involvement of underrepresented groups in research might be facilitated through a more “personalised approach” (Redwood & Gill, 2013). In our study, participants seemed to

demonstrate a good understanding of the purpose of the research and were involved on their own terms – how they felt most comfortable, in venues, and with people they were most familiar with.

For the research team, gatekeepers not only eased the pressure of recruiting participants but provided wider support that spanned the entire project. They helped to refine and ensure the suitability of recruitment strategies, research methods, and tools, for example, adverts and scripts for radio for publicity. Gatekeepers' requisite awareness, knowledge, and cultural competence arguably increased the methodological rigor of the study. When potential participants exercised power in their resistance to the research team's use of professional interpreters, and insistence that gatekeepers serve this purpose, gatekeepers willingly provided interpretation and translation services. To break down hierarchies of power with potential participants, the research team acted on participant preference and the outcomes were varied, with lessons learnt on how this approach might be used more effectively in future research. No doubt gatekeepers' "knowledge" of their communities was vast: their cultural norms, values, customs, language needs, and the mediums with which they engaged. This knowledge empowered the researchers to "reach" those purported "hard-to-reach" communities.

In this study, a new way of accessing participants was introduced to researchers by gatekeepers – building on existing but scarce literature which recognises that gatekeepers can hold additional knowledge and ideas that prove valuable to researchers (Davies & Peters, 2014). Gatekeepers expanded channels for the recruitment of participants in suggesting local community radio and providing guidance on how to use this as a platform through regular adverts in community languages and a community phone-in. Evidence from this study refutes the commonly portrayed one-dimensional role of the community gatekeeper as either granting or obstructing access to research participants (McFadyen & Rankin, 2016; Singh & Wassenaar, 2016; Sixsmith et al., 2003). Instead, it depicts them as potentially valuable sources of information for research teams with comprehensive "insider" knowledge of what works best to engage their communities.

Community groups and organisations potentially benefited from the greater involvement of their gatekeepers in research beyond issues related to "representation" and "voice." Knowledge from this study advances the aforementioned literature on the perceived narrow role of gatekeepers (as facilitating/hindering access) by highlighting how their cooperation not only aids research but potentially yields mutual benefits, that is, for the organisations led by them. For example, according to gatekeepers, some of these hubs of cultural experience had a reason to reopen (after closing due to austerity cuts) and bring together community members, albeit for a temporary purpose (research), and the energy in their community centres was noted by them. The economic benefits (of room hire, interpretation, and translation) helped community organisations experiencing a reduction in activities and services due to funding cuts, but perhaps also enhanced gatekeepers' sense of being valued for their expertise and provided continuity in serving their communities.

The findings of this article stress that if properly involved in research projects, gatekeepers have the potential to play a much broader role in supporting research objectives than existing literature suggests. Therefore, if the strategies outlined in this study are followed, these findings could be generalised to other populations purported as being "hard-to-reach," such as people with a history of substance misuse and addiction, asylum seekers and refugees, those experiencing homelessness, and people disconnected from labour markets. Nevertheless, the influence of a researcher's "insider" position in facilitating gatekeeper involvement must not be disregarded, which suggests that studies seeking to make use of gatekeepers will be most effective when undertaken by research teams comprising of members with some degree of insider status.



It should be noted that insider status also presents challenges for research. Although a culturally and linguistically diverse research team can help address specific barriers, they can also be too close to the subject matter, bringing the risk of bias to the research which must be mitigated through steps such as those outlined earlier in the article. Further, it must be recognised that “insiderness” is a form of power in the research process and my identity potentially impacted on participant responses. Indeed, the findings revealed how power was manifested by different gatekeepers in different ways: from denying local communities the “choice” to participate by refusing to engage with the research (Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008) to their control during the data collection process when acting as interpreters, which had a disruptive effect (in one case) potentially compromising the quality of the data.

These findings have implications for future research involving community gatekeepers to engage so-called “hard-to-reach” population groups. Strategies researchers might use to enhance the involvement of gatekeepers should include upskilling and capacity building. This would necessitate budgeting for training and skills development when developing funding proposals for BAME-specific research. A short course in interpretation skills, for example, not only builds the capacity of the individual, but also enhances their organisational capacity. Increasingly, researchers interested in deepening community involvement in research have trained and supported peer or community-based researchers to help community groups and voluntary organisations to develop research skills themselves (see for example Bennett, 2022). The benefits of this training have been manifold (Elliott et al., 2002), but essentially, the quality of research findings has been improved by the “insider” (Beebeejaun et al., 2015) knowledge of peer researchers; for example, ensuring that participants are asked relevant questions in the right way, in addition to addressing other issues related to power dynamics, familiarity, and trust (Edwards, 2013).

Conceivably, community organisations and the leaders within them are best placed to engage with BAME people and BAME issues but inevitably there exists a power imbalance (Emmel et al., 2007) based on the knowledge those leaders hold, enabling them to negotiate health, education, welfare support, and so on, on behalf of their BAME members. Organisations serving local communities should not be discounted for recruitment and researching activities, but instead, research teams should be sensitive to the possible dynamics at play and attempt to minimise them. For example, in a given research location, efforts should be made to recruit participants from several organisations and using different channels (e.g., local communications) to ensure wide representation and avoid engagement of the “usual suspects.” By investing time in research locations, being seen by community members, and getting involved in activities locally, researchers themselves could build relationships of trust (Aroian et al., 2006; Elliott et al., 2002) to be less reliant on gatekeepers.

The shift in and multifaceted nature of power demonstrated in gatekeeper control during interpretation of interviews and participants’ resistance to being interviewed by researchers using professional interpreters underscores the need for research teams to be flexible in responding to emergent issues in the field. Clearly, all of those present in a research site have the potential to introduce power relations, and such dynamics are not only limited to researchers and their participants. Indeed, ethical considerations are central to the lessons learnt during this study, in that whilst institutional ethics processes adhere to universal rules that work to ensure beneficence and avoidance of harm (McAreavey & Das, 2013), there is a failure to consider the emergent ethical dilemmas and negotiations of researchers when doing their research. Research complexities should routinely be reflected on during the research process, not only after completion, to allow adjustments to improve research practice while projects are “live.”

Broadly, feminist epistemological principles underpinned this investigation; however, the new knowledge gained from reflexive practice and data analysis reiterated that whilst my situated knowledge, that is, of race, culture, language skills, place, and so on, facilitated the

research process, it was the positionality and situated knowledge of the various gatekeepers that was more closely aligned to the BAME populations researched and moved the project along smoothly. Apparently, there is a lack of diversity in research teams in the UK (Bell et al., 2021) and plausibly internationally, hence, the implication for research with BAME people is that researchers lack the requisite breadth of knowledge and skills to research diverse communities, and therefore this study calls for a greater need to work in close partnership with BAME community gatekeepers.

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