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“It Puts Them in the Role of Zoo Animals”: Gatekeeping, Research Fatigue and Over-Researched Populations in Czech Social Work Research

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the ethical and methodological issues related to gatekeepers in social work research, often represented by social service professionals. This collaboration brings specific challenges, dilemmas, and benefits. A qualitative research strategy was used to explore research fatigue in the context of gatekeeping and its implications for ethics in social work research, particularly as it relates to marginalized and vulnerable groups. Eighteen interviews were conducted with researchers and gatekeepers. Constructivist grounded theory was used to analyze the data and the computer software program Atlas.ti was used to process the data. The results of the analysis are presented through three main themes: the specifics of gatekeeping in social work research; the time, emotional and ethical burden of research; and the search for new forms of collaboration and overcoming research fatigue. The research suggests that identifying the dynamics of research fatigue is key to minimizing the negative impacts on research practice and bridging the gap between research and practice in social work. In future studies, time dedicated to transparent communication, feedback, sharing research findings and building partnerships with social work practitioners and their clients could be an important element in preventing research fatigue.

KEYWORDS

Gatekeeping; social work research; research fatigue; over-researched populations

Introduction

Gatekeepers traditionally act in research as mediators between researchers and potential research participants (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2019). They provide access to marginalized and vulnerable groups, often viewed as hard-to-reach populations. These groups are hard-to-reach due to their vulnerability, social and/or physical location (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Although gatekeeping is an important part of research practice (Eldridge, 2013; Kay, 2019; McAreavey & Das, 2013), it has escaped research attention in social work.

The professional literature commonly portrays gatekeepers as individuals, small groups of people, or institutions that have a power to grant or deny access to a population under study (de Laine, 2000; Emmerich, 2016). More broadly, research ethics committees or fund providers can be seen as gatekeepers who enable or prevent research from being implemented (Broadhead & Rist, 1976;

Vadeboncoeur et al., 2016). As a rule, gatekeepers control access to certain areas, places, and locations (Emmerich, 2016), but also to certain people, discourses, and research topics (Eldridge, 2013). Social services and social workers work with marginalized groups who are sought-after research subjects (Sukarieh & Tannok, 2013, p. 496). For this reason, they become gatekeepers of social science research (Aaltonen & Kivijärvi, 2019; Clark, 2011).

The vulnerability of social work clients therefore requires careful decision-making by social services and individual workers about involvement in research. Alongside gatekeepers' power to enable or deny access goes a perceived moral responsibility of gatekeepers (Clark, 2011). However, the degree of gatekeeper's responsibility may vary depending on the gatekeeper type and their position and relationship to a hard-to-reach group the researcher wishes to study (Kay, 2019). This responsibility takes on specific challenges, dilemmas, and benefits in the context of working with social workers as gatekeepers.

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Discussion regarding research fatigue and over-researched communities has received minimal attention in social work. While some sociological or anthropological scholarly texts cover topics and over-researched groups related to social work research (Clark, 2008), they do not pay any attention to research fatigue in the context of gatekeeping. Research fatigue poses a major threat to future research collaborations with important stakeholders in social work practice. At the same time, it is an issue linked to research ethics (Ashley, 2021) and presents methodological challenges particularly in research of marginalized groups.

Gatekeeping in social science research

Existing social science discussion challenges the conceptual notion of static gatekeeping. During research, researchers typically encounter different types of gatekeepers who are in different layers and power relations in relation to the researcher, each other, and the population under study (Emmel et al., 2007; Kay, 2019). Therefore, it is more appropriate to focus on gatekeeping as a process involving a range of actors with different interests, motives and methods of gate-opening or gate-closing throughout the research process (Crowhurst & Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013; Eldridge, 2013).

Gatekeepers can be an important mediator between the researcher and the population under study, but at the same time they can exert control, make demands, and impose barriers to research collaboration (Clark, 2011). Gatekeepers at all layers can set boundaries and demands around their support at any point during the collaboration, which may complicate the research process (Eldridge, 2013; Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013; Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008). Gatekeepers' strategies of control over research can be quite explicit and visible, but also implicit. Gatekeepers who do not have the formal power to refuse participation because of their subordinate position may agree to participate but may be selective in what they are willing to discuss or may only allow access to certain types of participants (Wanat, 2008).

As a stranger in a research environment, the researcher may also encounter resistance and

vigilance from gatekeepers. If the research can potentially damage the reputation of the organization or institution, it is much easier not to enter into the collaboration (Scourfield, 2012). Repeated negative experiences with research the outputs of which have been presented and publicized in the past in a way that has deepened the stigmatization of the researched population instead of the claimed benefits may also trigger denial (Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008).

Engaging gatekeepers in research collaboration possesses potential risks for all, including the researcher, the gatekeeper, and the studied population. Social services and social workers in the role of gatekeepers are responsible for enabling access to complex life stories of their own clients or facilitating contact with the clients themselves. Circumstances and dilemmas of research collaboration that repeatedly fails to lead to a direct positive impact on the lives of clients or the work of social services can result in research fatigue and jeopardize future research collaboration with social services and gatekeepers.

Research fatigue and the practice-research gap in social work

Research fatigue occurs when individuals and groups start to become tired of participating in research and can be identified as a manifestation of reluctance to continue engaging in existing research, or they refuse or avoid participation in any further research (Clark, 2008). It is this internalized resistance to future engagement in research that is the focus of this paper. In the long term this can lead to a further practice-research gap in social work and may threaten the co-production of knowledge between academia and practice (Thyer, 2015).

Ashley (2021, p. 271) argues that determinants of research fatigue include "the concentration of research, its burdensomeness, its usefulness, and the psychosocial vulnerability of participants." These factors are based, in particular, on qualitative studies, which by their nature are more demanding in terms of time, finances, emotions but also ethical dilemmas (Clark, 2008). Research fatigue can affect researchers themselves (Mandel, 2003), and also research groups, which are relatively rare and

difficult to access (Boesten & Henry, 2018). These groups are considered over-researched communities, which traditionally include “communities that are poor, low income, indigenous, minority or otherwise marginalized; communities that have experienced some form of crisis (war, genocide, natural disaster, etc.) and/or have engaged in active resistance to the conditions of their poverty and marginalization; and communities that are accessible to outside researchers, in particular, by being located in close geographical proximity to research centers and universities.” (Sukarieh & Tannok, 2013, p. 496)

Refusal to engage in further research may be connected to previous research experience that participants considered unnecessary as it did not deliver any tangible benefits or outcomes for them (Ashley, 2021), and their hope that their participation in research would lead to real change gradually faded (Robinson & Lamaro Haintz, 2021). Repeated research experience can place an unbearably high burden on participants, causing re-traumatization, disappointment and anger due to the repeated sharing of sensitive personal information (Sukarieh & Tannok, 2013; Boesten & Henry, 2018). Even with less invasive research methods such as action research or participatory research, it is problematic to avoid similar negative dynamics. Tensions from research collaboration can stem from participants’ unfulfilled expectations of social and political change, or as a result of issues of representation and giving voice to only certain community members (Boesten & Henry, 2018).

There is a serious need to develop a critical debate regarding preventive steps to avoid the negative effects of research fatigue not only for researchers and participants, but also for gatekeepers, as they are an important partner for social work research. This discussion needs to include their voice, perspectives and experiences, which can help researchers gain critical feedback and reflect on new forms of research collaboration with stakeholders—social workers and clients in social work practice.

Current challenges of Czech social work

Social work in the Czech Republic, as in other European countries, faces many challenges. The effects of the global market economy with its

attendant need for global competitiveness have caused the influence of national governments on social policy to weaken. While in the West these transformations came in the 1980s with the crisis of the welfare state and the beginning of neoliberal policies, in post-communist countries these processes were caused by the fall of socialism, the spread of market reforms, reforms in the field of social security and changes in the perception and understanding of social question (Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2013). The weakening welfare states across Europe are unable to withstand the shocks of economic crises and the deepening precarisation of life in late modern capitalism (Sjöberg & Turunen, 2022). Different models of the welfare state are subject to change and transformation, while governments face pressures to cut public spending and reduce state intervention in the market and in the lives of citizens (Sjöberg et al., 2018). Social rights are increasingly subordinated to government policies that promote the reduction of public social programs and the formation of private markets for public services. As a result, social workers are forced to operate under an imperative of efficiency and resource conservation (Timor-Shlevin, 2021).

Social care and labor sectors are also significantly underfunded in the Czech Republic. As a result, we see an accumulation of related problems of workforce shortages, low financial remuneration, high turnover rates of social workers both in and out of the field, as well as increasing overwork for those who remain in social work practice (MoLSA [MPSV], 2019). The long-standing lack of prestige of the profession also remains a problem. This situation can be explained not only in terms of the low attractiveness of financial remuneration, but also in the context of the feminization of Czech social services and care, as the perception of care as “naturally” female work persists in Czech society. Work in social services is made up of approximately 86% women and only 14% men. Work in managerial positions is made up of approximately 57% women and 43% men (Čtvrtníčková & Táborská, 2021). The feminization of social services is reflected in the low prestige of the profession, working conditions, and financial remuneration of work in social services (Giovagnoniová et al., 2019).

Generally speaking, the funding of Czech social services is determined annually, and its

allocation from the state budget therefore primarily depends on governing politicians of the moment (MoLSA [MPSV], 2019). It is an unstable and unpredictable system for all—employers, employees, and clients themselves. Although the data and findings concerning the state and challenges of Czech social work are derived from analyses implemented by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, that is, the state body in charge of the country's social policy, the situation for social workers has not changed in the long term. However, unlike in Western countries or other post-socialist countries (Payne, 2002; Ross, 2016; Stanojević & Broder, 2012) social workers in the Czech Republic have not yet formed a sufficiently strong professional association or labor union that would be able to face these pressures. Control over the setting of goals, working conditions and the exercise of their profession remains to this day primarily in the hands of political leaders and state officials.

This article is based on a research project with researchers and gatekeepers in social work practice to explore their research collaboration. The analysis revealed that research fatigue is a critical issue that interferes with research collaboration negotiations. Therefore, this paper seeks to answer the question: under what circumstances does research fatigue arise between researchers and practitioners, what challenges does it pose to their research collaboration, and what are the options for overcoming research fatigue?

Methodology

Research model

This study draws on data from a research project that aimed to understand the negotiation process of collaboration and building of researcher-gatekeeper relationship during different stages of the research process, and to identify what facilitates or complicates researchers' access to hard-to-reach populations. Given the formulation of the objective and the low level of knowledge on the topic, a qualitative research strategy was chosen. The heuristic and holistic approach of qualitative research allowed to deal with specific cases in the full breadth of their context.

Sample

The qualitative study included a total of 18 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 researchers and 6 gatekeepers. The researchers were contacted with a help of the heads of social work departments/institutes. The main criterion for inclusion in the study was the implementation of field research in the last five years, focused on hard-to-reach populations in social work in which researchers engaged external mediators to gain access to informants and/or documents and information that directly affect this hard-to-reach population. This was research employing all types of research strategies—qualitative, quantitative, and mixed.

The interviews engaged researchers at different stages of their academic careers, ranging from PhDs, post-docs and experienced academics with PhDs, associate professorships, and full professorships. The research sample included a total of five men and seven women. The interviews took between 39 and 100 min (62 min on average) and were mostly devoted to one informant's chosen research topic (Table 1).

In addition, three types of gatekeepers were approached through a deliberate sampling process, and categorized as: institutional (administrative offices, courts, state institutions), formal (nonprofit sector, social services) and informal (community activists/leaders) gatekeepers.

The gatekeepers interviewed were two men and four women who have had many years of experience in their work positions, and over the course of their work performance they have come across situations where they may have enabled/refused research collaboration. The gatekeeper sample included one representative from the ministry, one representative from municipality, two female supervisors in a nonprofit organization, one activist/community worker from a socially excluded locality, and one representative from a regional authority. The interviews ranged in length from 28 to 71 min (the average interview length was 52 min) (Table 2).

Instruments

In the interviews, researchers were asked to reflect on their own practice in relation to conducting research in collaboration with gatekeepers, including their views on the importance of gatekeepers

Table 1. Communication partners (researchers).

Acronym	Their gatekeepers	Target group	Interview duration
R1	Roma regional coordinators, NGOs	Roma children ages 7–11, both excluded and included	39 min
R2	social services	families with children in substandard housing, helping professions	1 h
R3	district court	children involved in court proceedings (case files)	40 min
R4	social services	women in private sex business	56 min
R5	NGOs, prison managers	children of parents serving prison sentence, individuals serving prison sentence	50 min
R6	social and community workers	excluded families	1 h
R7	community workers	excluded families	5 min
R8	general directorate, prison directors	prison employees	1 h 2 min
R9	employment office, ministry, municipal authorities	officials	1 h
R10	publicly known activists, community leaders	population at risk of displacement living in selected communities	18 min
R11	school principals	teachers in schools working with children in substandard housing	54 min
R12	schools, child protection services, employment office, ministry, health insurance company, Institute of Health Information and Statistics, NGOs	families with children in substandard housing	51 min
			50 min
			1 h
			16 min

Table 2. Communication partners (gatekeepers).

Acronym	Type of gatekeeper	Function/organization	Interview duration
G1	Institutional	Methodist of Department for Social Inclusion, Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic	45 min
G2	Informal	Community worker in NGO implementing community work in a segregated locality	1 h 3 min
G3	Formal	Deputy director of the NGO providing social services	57 min
G4	Formal	Director of the NGO providing social services	1 h 11 min
G5	Institutional	Methodist of city magistrate	50 min
G6	Institutional	Methodist of region office	28 min

and what they considered good and bad practice, the practical and theoretical impact of different strategies for gaining access when researching hard-to-reach populations, and the influence of gatekeepers on these processes. Gatekeepers were asked to talk about their experience with research, specifically about their role as gatekeepers, their reasons for involvement, the process of involving clients in research, reflection and evaluation of research cooperation, impacts of research cooperation.

The interviews were conducted between June and November 2022 either online or in person by the first and second author of the paper. The Zoom platform was used for online meetings. Interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim by the third author. An interview script was used, which was created separately for each group (researchers and gatekeepers).

Procedure and Data Analysis

The research was approved by the ethics committee of Faculty of Social Studies, University of Ostrava before the start of data collection. In conducting the research, the researchers followed the Ethical Principles for Human Subjects Research adopted by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2016). Each participant was asked to grant informed consent to be recorded on a Dictaphone. Upon completion of the research, the recordings were deleted. The computer software program ATLAS.ti was used to organize, analyze, and store the data. Data were processed using the Charmaz's Grounded Theory (2006), particularly through coding and through memo-writing and interpreting the data. At the same time, research team members discussed topics and data interpretations during their team meetings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Thorne et al., 2004). The analytical process, which was implemented according to the Charmaz approach (2006), consisted of two basic phases. The initial phase involved naming each segment of data, which is called open coding. It is the process of naming units of text that carry a certain meaning. This was followed by a second selective phase. Charmaz (2006) uses the term focused coding. In this analysis based on the most significant or most frequent initial codes, sorting, synthesizing, integrating large amounts of data took place. Through memos, researchers' thoughts were recorded and analyzed against

specific codes. Writing memos helped in comparing and linking data and data, data and codes, codes and categories. At the same time, it cannot be claimed that the output of this research is a comprehensive theory. Given Charmaz's constructivist approach, it is necessary to talk about theorizing as a process of interpretation rather than theory. Theorizing, according to her, is a practice that "entails the practical activity of engaging the world and of constructing abstract understandings about and within it" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 128). This interpretive approach focuses on what is reality for a particular group of people, what their perceptions of reality are and how they act on them. The results presented in this article are linked to an interpretive paradigm that acknowledges the existence of multiple realities while recognizing that the resulting knowledge depends on the particular perspectives, positions and experiences of those involved in the research.

Findings

Specifics of gatekeeping in social work research

When working with gatekeepers, the researcher need to deal with various dynamics of social relationships, needs, concerns, and gatekeeper pressures that cannot be anticipated in advance. For this reason, he or she is forced to make flexible and situational assessments of the subsequent research steps that will lead to reciprocal collaboration (Emmel et al., 2007). "I helped them at some phases because I came to conclusion that it wasn't an harmful thing...that it wasn't harming anybody...that there was no harm involved...on the contrary, I felt that it could help in that context, and in fact that was my criterion that actually I would be involved in some..., in the implementation of interests of those people until the moment I evaluate that it could cause harm either to a third party or to myself." (R7) However, research in collaboration with gatekeepers also requires diligent preparation of procedures for dealing with different types of gatekeepers who have specific positions and interests in the gatekeeper structure. Preliminary mapping of the terrain is an important prerequisite for subsequent

successful situational strategizing (Broskevičová & Gřundělová, 2023).

Research has demonstrated that the shared professional identity of gatekeeper and researcher, which interconnects them, tends to be an important motive for engagement. "I admit that some space for the research opportunities to be out there is not going to be created by anyone other than us—people in practice, and that that is somehow our responsibility to the field. I feel very much so." (G4) A shared identity provides a good basis for building a close, trusting relationship that helps build successful research collaborations (Wilson, 2020). It has shown that a professional shared interest to produce social work knowledge is something that is also perceived by gatekeepers, i.e., by social work practitioners themselves. "If there's just some transcendence of that activity, or it's somehow complementary...that we can actually make a use of it somehow as well, or I can see that our know-how is meaningful for the research...that it can advance the field somehow, then there's probably a greater potential for developing those longer-term relationships or some of that more intensive collaboration." (G1)

However, relying on collegiality and a "natural" shared interest in the field development is not always enough. It is quite effective for gate opening if there is a relationship of trust between the gatekeeper and the target group. The gatekeeper then guarantees security for the participants, who are in turn more open to collaboration. This, however, creates an internal conflict for social workers about what else falls within their role and job description, and when, on the contrary, they exercise power in favor of helping researchers at the expense of their clients. Thus, there is a certain ethical conflict between their conception of work ethics and support for researchers. "...It seems to me...it's kind of ambivalent, it's necessary, but it's just like on some kind of borderline with ethics, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to get to those clients at all if I wasn't doing the work...and they're making the contract with me to help them somehow...not that there's going to be five more people writing their papers about it." (G3)

Some clients enter into the collaboration mainly because of an actual relationship (whether

positive or negative) with their key social worker. Gatekeepers are aware of their power and responsibility to enable access to their own clients, who would otherwise be hard-to-reach for researchers. “Because it’s one thing to work with the anonymised data that we already have...it’s then some extra work from office staff...another thing is if we allow someone directly into that environment...which already can be a very invasive direction toward those clients... given the fact that sometimes a city property, or social services department, a social worker, or child protection services go in, it would just be another stakeholder. So, it would be another stakeholder that would, in this particular case, without any apparent positive intention, come into that household.” (G6)

The time, emotional and ethical burden of research

Social services are one of the typical gatekeepers in social work research, allowing researchers to reach specific target groups they are working with. As a result, social services are exposed to frequent requests for collaboration not only from research institutions, male and female researchers, but also from students. “...Today everybody is overwhelmed with requests to be involved in some research maybe within Bachelor and Master theses, which I understand because the primary objective of social services is to provide social services...and this is something extra.” (R2) As a result, social services and their staff are overworked, and their clients repeatedly researched. “I get why they do it...I get that the data is like necessary, but it’s like going somewhere every month and asking clients if they would like to... it actually seems to me it puts them in the role of animals in a zoo a bit...like there’s always someone to examine them. And it’s just too much.” (G3)

An onslaught of gate opening requests interferes with the work of staff who repeatedly have to expend time and energy beyond their daily duties. Work conditions in the Czech social services sector, similar to other countries, are subject to a bureaucratic burden, lack of work capacities and financial undervaluation (Hubíková et al., 2015; MoLSA [MPSV], 2019; Nečasová &

Musil, 2006; Suchanec & Ďásek, 2019). However, the current demands placed on finding sources of funding, writing projects, and measuring the effectiveness and performance of social workers’ interventions limit actual chances to engage in research. “...Really for us it’s, first of all a capacity issue...both the big research projects and those that can give us a good feeling that we’re somehow helping to expand the knowledge in our field...basically, we can do it like twice a year...more is not realistic, and it all totally depends also on for when they time it. If they engage us in the middle of summer or in November, December, or if they want us to participate in the period of grants, reporting and billing, project writing, then it’s a bad luck for them...it doesn’t get priority.” (G4) At the same time, by “stealing” staff time, researchers may be symbolically contributing to feelings of undervalued work of social workers in practice who already have very limited time capacity. Frustration and fatigue from burdensome research projects continue to grow if gatekeepers feel that the only one who benefits from the whole collaboration is the researcher. At the same time, they violate the privacy of their clients, and can trigger re-traumatisation as well as false hope for change. “That’s just a terribly sad thing about it that academia has no impact at all on people’s real problems and their solution...and that’s just vanity, you’d rather write some pleading letters to some foundations to send those people rent money than spend time with a researcher.” (G3)

The researchers also reflected on fears of participants—usually staff of social service agencies or other types of organizations—of criticism or evaluation of their work performance. The researcher may find himself or herself in a situation of involuntary cooperation, especially in hierarchically managed organizations. He or she is usually not in a position to control what and how has been communicated to the participants by the gatekeeper. The inability to voluntarily refuse cooperation by a participant (employee) with a weaker power position can significantly affect the final form of the research cooperation contributing to growing research fatigue. “Today people are afraid in the organizations, I’m not surprised...I worked for a municipality for many years, I used

to be a department head and I know that they're under a lot of fear and are afraid there, so yeah, it's always risky for them to put money on a horse." (R5) The fear of being assessed may also be linked to the low prestige of the social work profession in the Czech Republic discussed above, often publicly criticized and misunderstood. The position of social workers in social services, but also in public administration or the prison system, is significantly undervalued both symbolically and financially. The suspicion of another evaluation and criticism thus constitutes a great barrier to their research collaboration.

Researchers leave the lives of research participants/clients after some time, but it is social workers who remain. It is them who must deal with unintended consequences of research, which can lead to frustration and disappointment, among other things (Sukarieh & Tannok, 2013). Such experiences can then trigger research fatigue on the part of participants/clients and gatekeepers themselves. Therefore, enabling access to clients is about weighing the benefits and potential risks for clients, and also for the continued social worker-client collaboration. "I know that we need the data to create some knowledge, on the other hand the data just focuses on that extremely vulnerable group...I have an experience from my own case work that I think is not discussed much, and that is that clients who are maybe cognitively worse off feel like when someone comes in and they share their story with them...that something's going to happen...that someone's going to help them. And they differentiate very poorly that they told someone again and it was of no use...and it's then left completely untreated on the social worker, and I actually hate it." (G3)

In some cases, gatekeepers reported that they lacked feedback and output sharing by researchers. It repeatedly did not reach the mediated participants or the gatekeepers themselves. Meanwhile, Nicholson et al. (2013) capture in their study that failure to provide feedback from research teams during or after research studies had been completed can contribute to disillusion with research, what it is good for and what it delivers. "By us not receiving any output, I don't know what they've learned, what they've researched, or if they were actually

totally wrong with their hypotheses...if I don't know the output, I don't know how that's going to affect me. ...That I'm basically just on that input anyway." (G6) Repeated experience with research that has no perceived positive outcome can have a significant impact on the development of research fatigue (Ashley, 2021). "The researchers didn't get back to us...they didn't come back and say, 'we'd like to share the output with you...you know, the research went so and so...', I'm missing that. That skipped the respondents...failed to give them some feedback." (G2)

It remains a great challenge for researchers how to communicate the benefits and impacts of even basic research important for the development of social work as a scientific field, but less essential for solving the difficult life conditions of social service clients or problems faced by social work practitioners. "...We sometimes let them feel it, especially with the matters that I don't think are very useful...and that the field, or us, or our clients, or whoever, doesn't take anything from it, so I don't really care..." (G4) These discussed barriers can significantly complicate and hinder research with social workers as gatekeepers. However, critical feedback emerged from the interviews, as well as important suggestions for future collaboration and ideas about how social work research can deal with ethical dilemmas arising from research fatigue and over-researching a particular population.

Seeking new forms of collaboration and overcoming research fatigue

Researcher relationships and their personal and professional contact networks are a key source of access in social work research. Social ties play a central role at the beginning, during and at the end of research with gatekeepers. For the purposes of research, the researcher often first activates his or her personal and professional networks of contacts in order to reach target gatekeepers. "So, we always really used to prefer networking...of course, in the phase of sending or doing the survey across the Czech Republic, we of course took a social service providers register as a base, and based on their email addresses

we sent it to everybody yeah, but they didn't return them..." (R2) Without a social capital of the researcher, the negotiation efforts are more precarious, as there is a greater likelihood of access denial. Mobilizing contacts in one's immediate circle or within a professional network not only represents an acceleration of the research process but is often the only way to implement research successfully. The researcher's social capital can be greatly enhanced by his or her previous work experience in the field of social work. The position of a former insider is an important accelerator of collaboration in the form of a shared history with people who represent potential gatekeepers. "I've been in the field maybe for around, I don't know, 20 years that I know the people personally... but it was basically about that one has been in the field for 15 years, worked on various projects with those people...has had a history with them." (R2)

A personal or professional contact in the right place can ensure research approval from places that would be very difficult to negotiate. At the same time, it can allow access through unofficial channels without the knowledge of one's superiors. Therefore, activating personal contacts in gatekeeping also entails emotional and ethical challenges. "Well, I felt rather weird there because it was clear that I was on a first name basis with her [gatekeeper] and that we acted in a familiar way with each other, right...they [participants] were in a position there like...the whole thing was weird for me a bit..." (R11) Gatekeepers, thanks to their relationship with the researcher, can also legitimize the researcher's credibility in the eyes of participants and facilitate the whole process of trust building with the participants. At the same time, however, the researcher subjects a gatekeeper to additional responsibilities (toward clients, superiors), risks and possible unintended consequences that the researcher may not have complete control over. Legitimizing the credibility of the researcher and the research by the gatekeeper is therefore crucial to establishing a successful collaboration with participants. In certain situations, therefore, researchers need to devote sufficient time during a negotiation process to building trust. "We talked about it a lot...Before I got to conduct research interviews, I had to call

her maybe three times and those calls were an hour long and she always said to me that she wasn't sure if it made any sense and asked about how it was funded." (R10)

However, the researchers reflected on the risk in the form of a limited range of contacts and thematized a certain bias of the research population that is in the gatekeeper's inner circle. Moreover, the repeated use of "proven" social contacts may also lead to the same range of clients being used and therefore over-researching a particular population. Clients repeatedly engage in research at the call of the social worker-gatekeeper, but the motives or voluntariness may not always be entirely obvious to the researcher. "And there're like risks in where she lets you go... she has a lot of power over who she contacts... that you're not allowed to...the risk is to see her as your only chance... you also need to see other possibilities...look for them and don't be just taken in by the fact that you actually have her and therefore you have super data, because you might be missing some insight." (R6)

If researchers are trying to establish collaboration beyond their own social capital, it has turned out that taking time for transparent partner communication, feedback and sharing of research output can be at least a minimal step to value the time and energy of gatekeepers and participants. Such an approach may also stimulate their interest in engaging in research in the future. "Well, what else I'd like to see in the future is that the output of the research projects is presented to the guys who were interviewed or filled out an anonymous questionnaire survey. I know it's not written anywhere that they were anonymised, but I think that those people could be given a small hope...perhaps it's a right, I don't know...to get some feedback as to what they [researchers] concluded in the research." (G2) Special attention should be paid to reciprocity of collaboration. Material, financial, and symbolic remuneration for gatekeepers and participants can reinforce a deeper ethical dimension of research. Negotiated reciprocity does not always have to be material and fulfill only an instrumental motivational function. The researchers reflected on a spectrum of reciprocal behaviors that were planned and situationally assessed based on the communicated

needs of gatekeepers and participants. In addition to sharing final output, collaboration can also involve establishing longer-term collaborations, forming alliances, and/or mobilizing one's own resources to improve the situation of clients.

It also shows that a selected research method or technique can act in the direction of closing or opening potential research collaboration. On the one hand, researchers are under pressure of increasingly higher methodological demands in order to get their projects funded; on the other hand, they must also take into account that if their data collection is too time-consuming and technically demanding, it may close the door to the data and informants they need. For this reason, one gatekeeper talked about an ethnographic approach and a participant observation method as a possible way forward as it is less invasive. "And I think that this collaborative approach... which is about 'come do it with us'...and if you do it smartly, they'll end up giving you the respondents and will feel good about it...that's also a way of working on it... That he would just like spend some time in the organization, not asking questions, but just being there, attending some events, and gradually contacting those people, but I understand that it's very time-consuming, financially-demanding, but I wouldn't mind actually working with someone like that..." (G3) By employing ethnographic research, a researcher can spend more time in the research environment and establish closer and more authentic relationships of trust. However, he or she can also get to know the staff, the organization and especially those targeted by the research better.

Some researchers see great potential in the increasingly popular participatory research methodology, which offers a better way of overcoming barriers to collaboration and bridging a gap between research and practice. On the other hand, some reported that this type of research is not always feasible for them due to time constraints. "Yes, exactly, and a million things on top of it and you're just terribly short on time there and you're happy in general that you managed to get some respondents and have some interviews, and you just have no time to go to them repeatedly." (R11) Gatekeepers also tended to favor a more participatory approach by researchers, reflecting on the

limitations of "traditional" research methods for their clients, whom they know well. "Our clients very often see the questions as test questions, and they don't give true answers...they answer it as what the right answer should be, right...and it's awfully difficult to disengage them from that...it just won't do to tell them it's not a test question." (G4) On the other hand, action research can encourage false hope in broad social or political change (Boesten & Henry, 2018). It is therefore essential to communicate potential impacts and limitations of research carefully and responsibly with all stakeholders involved in order not to feed unrealistic expectations. "Well, those researchers...I don't know what experience they have with communicating, interviewing, of filling out questionnaires with people that the research is targeting, so that they should really have all the courses in terms of communication." (G2)

One of the instruments to involve gatekeepers more closely in research may be the role of application guarantor. "Yes, exactly, you involve an application guarantor from the very beginning...it can actually break the mistrust and maybe, when I think about it, in that TACR (applied research project) it worked better." (R11) An application guarantor is an organization or person that or who has an interest in the application and use of the planned output of a research project in practice. Application guarantors have a role to play in the preparation stage of the project proposal, during the project implementation and after its completion. "And that's where, I would say, it was probably the most intense...when we were the application guarantors and somehow, we also sort of, I don't know, actually promoted XY or tried to promote...we draw on that..." (G1) Increasing the participation of gatekeepers in symbolic terms means acknowledging their expertise and needs in social work practice. At the same time, it realistically facilitates power sharing over the research process and research output. Thus, a participatory approach in collaboration with gatekeepers can bridge the gap that some gatekeepers see between the practice environment and academia—between different needs regarding a nature and type of knowledge, insights on topical, contemporary social work issues, or between different professional experiences and expertise. "Whereas in the corporate sector you've got loads of opportunities where it sort of meets...and

the production sector has opportunities for much more commission...they can afford ordering those academics to work on their stuff, because they've got something interesting, as opposed to in the social sector we're actually just waiting to see who's going to come in and shows some interest in us." (G4) At the same time, greater gatekeeper involvement may alleviate concerns about a negative presentation of an already marginalized group in society (Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008). "Of course, I'm not at all denying the ethics of any research, everyone has their supervisor and such, but you get the questions, and you give answers that match a nature of your questions...and there can always be a risk of some interpretation and the way you ask those questions. And this is not in our hands." (G3)

Limitations

A limitation of the findings presented is the constructivist and interpretive approach to social reality that was used in the data analysis. As mentioned above, the data presented in this paper are based on the specific experiences of the participating communication partners and report on a specific research context in the field of Czech social work practice, which limits the possibility of generalizability and transferability of the results. Related to this is the limitation of the sample of the presented research. Although the sample in the qualitative research does not represent the population, but represents the research problem, the selection of certain types of gatekeepers and researchers from the social work field influenced the current form of the findings. Therefore, the research cannot be said to have fully unpacked the research problem of research fatigue and its associated methodological and ethical issues in all their complexity. However, the research has been able to reveal some of the factors of invisible research fatigue that often go unspoken in research collaborations but can complicate future research collaborations and the inability to negotiate collaborations with gatekeepers (Clark, 2008).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide an understanding of the hidden barriers to conducting social

work research with vulnerable groups, often over-researched communities, who are accessed through practitioners acting as gatekeepers in social work research. The findings indicate that social work research in certain contexts becomes a burden rather than a benefit for practitioners or researched communities, causing research fatigue and widening the perceived gap between research and practice that discourages practitioners from collaborating as gatekeepers. Current studies show that research fatigue is an invisible threat that poses a various ethical and methodological challenges to research collaboration (Ashley, 2021; Boesten & Henry, 2018; Koen et al., 2017). The findings presented in this article further suggest that a necessary way to overcome these obstacles is to acknowledge the limits of academic research, its limited impact on practice and to seek new forms of research collaboration with practitioners. These findings are consistent with those of Teater (2017) or Denvall and Skillmark (2021), whose research shows how current social work research only minimally influences practice, highlight the need to make the problem visible and suggests possible strategies for building bridges between research and practice. As Driessens et al. (2011) point out, the aim of such collaborations is to develop research and knowledge that is both academically based and relevant to the challenges faced by social services and professionals in everyday practice. The research presented showed that fostering increased interest in research collaboration on the part of practitioners requires building partnerships, recognizing their voice, different types of knowledge and research needs. There is currently a very strong trend in social work research toward engagement and co-production in relation to people with lived experience (Davies & Gray, 2017; Fisher et al., 2018) but less research attention has been paid to the process of building partnerships with practitioners. This fact is highlighted also by the research of Steens et al. (2018) who therefore sought to understand how such partnerships can be successfully developed and implemented in local social work practice. However, more evidence of successful partnership structures building directly in practice is needed to inspire others.

Conclusion

Researchers in the field face many ethical and practical challenges when working with gatekeepers (McAreavey & Das, 2013). They are often forced to respond flexibly to random unexpected situations while considering the time and money aspect of implementing funded research. One of these challenges is in encountering frustration, rejection, and disinterest from gatekeepers. This reaction may stem from their previous research experience and growing research fatigue. In addition, the gatekeeping process in social work is influenced by the profession's strong ethical guidelines and the specific trust-power relationship between social worker and client (IFSW, 2018). As was demonstrated above, this is precisely what gatekeepers in social work are well aware of and widely reflect on as they seek to use their power and established trust with their clients in a conscious and reflexive way. Their perspectives helped to uncover internal ethical and external practical dilemmas they experience when deciding whether or not to allow access to researchers.

These aspects of the research fatigue dynamics can often remain hidden to researchers in the field, unlike the time aspect of fatigue, which has a much more visible impact on the additional workload of staff in social service agencies and other facilities. For this reason, intention in this paper was to offer insight into the critical perspectives of practitioners who have experience of the gatekeeper role in Czech social work. The aim was to contribute to a discussion on the possibilities of balancing or reducing research fatigue in social work research, as it represents a serious challenge for research ethics and future collaboration with practitioners. In such a case, it is not possible to rely only on ethics committees and informed consent as a guarantee of ethical practice in research. In order to overcome research fatigue and the research-practice gap in social work, it is important to be opening a genuine dialogue, alliance and partnership structures. Such a goal requires science and research to be open to critique and input from practitioners if researchers need cooperation from them. Indeed, as the results of the presented research show, the involvement of practitioners in research means that researchers also ask them to

take on a considerable portion of the burden, risk, and responsibility for enabling access to their clients. The extent to which they feel this way can remain hidden and unaddressed by researchers.

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