

Secrecy and knowledge production: Doing research in corporate organisational settings

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges of conducting research in secretive corporate organisational settings where corporate professionals are informants and gate keepers of the research. It draws on experiences of negotiating access to informants and conducting research within regulatory and Contract Research Organizations (CROs) for a PhD project aimed at exploring the ethical and regulatory issues associated with the conduct of first-in-human clinical trials in the UK. The explicit ways in which secrecy surrounds the practice of clinical trials, relates to a theory of, and ways of, knowledge production that directly opposes the principles of modern academia. This brings up important questions for researchers: is it possible to carry out research while abiding by the values of good research practice, such as transparency, if one's informants or gatekeepers are not open and transparent? This is because the secrecy in the practice of pharmaceutical research is in sharp contrast to postmodern social research practices in which social scientists believe that the production and distribution of knowledge is key to resolving social problems. Precisely, this paper explores the challenges faced by early career researchers (ECRs) in negotiating access and conducting research, and how such settings influence not only the questions for the research but the methods to be used as well. Drawing on experiences in tackling these issues, the paper argues that to carry out research ECRs have to use a swathe of tactics and sometimes depend on luck to gain access and eventually do their research.

Introduction

Among the major contributors to sociological debates about knowledge production is Polish historian of science Fleck (1935). In the recent past, his views have been included in debates about the production of scientific knowledge (Arksey, 1994). In his work Fleck seemed to have foreseen debates that were to follow half a century later about the production of knowledge by philosophers and sociologists, such as Kuhn (2012), Bloor (1976) and Collins (1981) among others. In his extensive work on the *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* on the study of syphilis, Fleck developed the idea that knowledge emanates from a collective process of interactions and communication among defined 'thought collectives'. By 'thought collectives' Fleck refers to groups of people organised with an esoteric core

of specialist scientists and an exoteric (surrounding the esoteric core) of the public consisting of both educated and uneducated individuals. Fleck's argument is that scientific knowledge is not merely produced in isolation and then distributed to the public but rather that the public is involved in the knowledge production process by verifying or endorsing knowledge produced by specialists. Similarly, actor-network theorists such as Latour (1987; 1988), suggest networks of expert scientists and their interactions with their immediate portions of the wider public are integral parts in the production of knowledge. In the aforementioned theories, they claim that the public is involved in knowledge production, although only as endorsers of the knowledge produced.

One of the criticisms of Fleck's work is that he conceived of the public as inactive in the knowledge production process. This has been taken further by more recent sociologists of science and technology who argue that today knowledge production is in 'mode 2' (Gibbons et al, 1994). Mode 2 refers to the shift in the location of knowledge production from established scientific institutions and disciplines to more heterogeneous and multiple spaces, practices and locations. In other words, knowledge today is thought to be produced and applied in trans-disciplinary collaborations and contexts. In this sphere scientists are seen as more reflexive and working to different quality standards compared to the traditional disciplinary mode (Hessels and Van Lante, 2008). Mode 1 knowledge production (the traditional disciplinary approach) refers to ways in which experts had hegemonic power and expertise of what was known and considered as valid knowledge. However, it is not clear in this discussion what the differences are with regards to the quality criteria on which mode 1 and 2 are based or how they come about. Nonetheless, it is important to note here that mode 2 is seen as referring to how knowledge production is now thought to be a more democratic process in that it is open, involving both lay and expert contributions.

The limitation to this view is that it over assumes consensus among different actors in the knowledge production process and does not take into account how power and interest can still result in secrecy. Although Fleck has also been criticised for his view on the role of the public in the knowledge production process, it is his awareness of the divide between scientists and the public in the knowledge production process that this paper aims to build on. Though recent debates assume a democratic knowledge production process, the separation between the public and scientists remains clear to see today, especially because knowledge in some contexts, but more so in the pharmaceutical industry, has economic value. This paper aims to illustrate how the esoteric and exoteric circles of scientists and the public are sustained. This will be done by reflecting on the challenges I faced in conducting research in a corporate medical setting for my PhD, which was concerned with exploring human involvement in first-in-human clinical trials. The aim of this research was to explore how risks that arise out of

medical technological innovations are distributed across commercial and geographical spaces in the UK. This paper is not a discussion of the ethics involved in doing research in corporate medical settings, but rather a reflection on how secrets, commercial interests and politics contour the conduct of social research and the production of knowledge.

Secrecy and knowledge production

In re-reading Fleck, his separation of an esoteric centre composed of scientific specialists and an exoteric circumference composed of lay people (both educated and uneducated) symbolised his awareness of the closed nature of scientific knowledge production. Fleck argues that all knowledge produced has its own thought style, particular cultural traditions and education in which its producers partake. This context is thought to have its 'own history and aspirations and demands that are decisive for their cognition' (Fleck, 1927: 49). Fleck's point here is that scientific knowledge is shaped by the cultural context in which it is produced and that producers of such knowledge are a part of a community with mutually shared ideas and intellectual interaction. The shared 'thought collectives' connect individuals together. For Fleck, 'thought collectives' structure a scientific community and its 'thought styles'. Fleck defines 'thought styles' as 'the readiness for directed perception with corresponding mental objective assimilation of what has been so perceived' (1935: 99) which intertwine to carry and sustain the discourse in scientific knowledge production process. However, he adds that, 'thought styles' are not actually visible to the members of these groups. However, they are governed by inherent assumptions which in the process determine and constrain ways of thinking and responses (Fleck, 1936). What is important here is that for Fleck, contrary to commonly held assumptions that it is objective, scientific knowledge is shaped and structured by cultural ideas in the contexts in which it is produced.

Although Fleck has been criticised, and rightly so, for portraying the public as an inactive part of the process, his awareness of the separation of specialist scientific knowledge production and public involvement in this process is what this paper focuses on. As Aftergood (1995) observes, although science is often thought to be aimed at producing knowledge with an emphasis on the need for open exchange of information, secrecy is still prevalent today in knowledge production and clearly sits in opposition to the view that knowledge should be shared. Furthermore as Edsall (1975) stated, the primary purpose of science and all those involved in its processes is to advance knowledge and provide clarification, dispersion, elucidation and evaluation of its impact. Therefore, if science is based on this premise and includes the dispersion of produced knowledge, secrecy is the polar opposite as it demands 'differential knowledge' (Aftergood, 1995; 17). By limiting knowledge about practices and processes involved in the production of pharmaceutical products such as drugs from the public, one

would argue pharmaceutical companies derive benefits from it as they may not be interrogated about their practices.

Within sociology there have been attempts to explore expert and lay interactions in the knowledge production process. For instance Wynne (1998) studied the differences between public and expert conceptions of risk. Arksey (1994) looked at ways in which knowledge about disease conditions are shaped by the sharing of knowledge between lay and professional experts. Using Repetitive Strain Injury as a case study, Arksey explored the challenges that arise when patient experiences do not fit into established professional knowledge. Similarly Epstein (1995) explored how activism played a key role in influencing scientific knowledge and responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and 1990's. Additionally, Brown and Zavestoski (2004) have looked at how health social movements have shaped medical knowledge by challenging political, expert and structural authority on medical and health issues. What the above examples illustrate is, firstly, how the public can challenge and influence expert knowledge production and, secondly, they also illustrate how without some kind of resistance the public is often likely to be excluded in the knowledge production process. Therefore, Fleck's observations become relevant in the analysis of the practice of pharmaceutical clinical trials as these processes are often secret.

This links to how secrecy is connected to issues of access not just to the knowledge produced but also to institutions in which knowledge is produced (Fitz and Halpin, 1994). With regards to pharmaceutical research, proponents of secrecy justify the secrets in the pharmaceutical industry through economic rationality in which secrecy is seen as an essential part of the industry. Therefore giving access to knowledge to your competitors or any others who may duplicate your innovations makes the whole purpose of research inefficient (Dennis, 1995). Other theorists, such as Merton (1942), observe that secrecy became acceptable in the ways in which governments operated because it was the only way certain policy actions would become effective. He observes that making such things public would have undermined the effectiveness of governments and thus keeping information to a small close circle of confidants was considered a prudent thing to do. Such an attitude is equally common in corporate institutions where information about their mode of operations have to be kept from the public in order to increase profit margins. In these contexts secrecy is seen as a necessary part of the business. At the same time there is a call for public trust in practices of such institutions.

A critical look at Fleck's (1935) and Merton's (1942) works shows that analysing access is key to understanding secrecy, and that access is often interspersed with notions of power and trust. Therefore, understanding secrecy requires exploring aspects namely, like access, power and trust among others. For anyone to have access to information about the operations of the pharmaceutical industry, one must be seen as trustworthy and not a threat to their interests. At the same time, corporations, like any powerful

institutions, have the power to influence research by denying or granting access. Goldacre (2012) has shown how secrecy surrounds the pharmaceutical industry and its resistance to making data obtained from clinical trials public. He also shows how the public is asked to trust the industry in their work. Therefore, within this context, social research attempts to explore ways in which knowledge is created are often looked down upon. This may be due to, among other reasons, the nature of questions that social scientists may ask – the questions may be seen as attempts to reveal sensitive information; questions about what science is; and whether social research falls within the remit of what is considered ‘science’. In this framework Fleck’s observations that science often involves an inner circle of expertise becomes evident. It is this inner circle of experts and the challenges of gaining access for social research specifically in corporate medical settings that this paper attempts to explore.

Researching corporate professionals: Power and access

An analysis of the operations and organisations of the esoteric circle requires a consideration of the power they possess. The definition of power as a concept in social science is a highly contested one, with no consensus as to whether power has positive or negative associations. As such there is no single unifying definition of power (Neal, 1995). However, power involves questions about who influences or impacts whose life more. Whose actions seriously affect the interests of others? Who benefits by bringing about certain outcomes? (Luke 2005). This paper adopts a meaning of power that builds on the postmodern view where power is not a property to be owned but is complexly linked to everyday interactions and can facilitate and repress agency (Foucault, 1982). Therefore, power is not just the visible force on people but also operates in subtle ways that may not necessarily be visible to the eye (Deem, 1994).

It is important to consider power relations in research because most social research on volunteering in clinical trials has been limited to research on volunteers, specifically patient groups (Corrigan, 2003; Evans, 2004; Slevin et al., 1995). One explanation for this has been the idea that by virtue of their position, people of ‘low’ status in the social hierarchy tend to be participants of most sociological research because their position makes them easily accessible with little or no hindrances (Corrigan, 2003; Evans, 2004; Heaven et al., 2006). In contrast, people in powerful positions are able to shield themselves from public scrutiny by refusing to take part in research or by the virtue of the complex processes in place that need to be negotiated to access them (Maguire and Ball, 1994). In the recent past there has been an increase in research looking at professionals such as, Hunter’s (1993) study of local elites, Fitz and Halpin’s (1992) study of government civil servants and ministers involved in the formulation of grant maintained schools, and Atkinson and Flint’s (2001) study of hard to reach elite groups, among others. The experiences from these studies and other studies involving professionals show that research that involves professionals is political and

wrought with complex power relations that need negotiating (Bryman, 2012; Fitz and Halpin, 1994; Neal, 1995). Specifically research that involves corporate organisations, such as the pharmaceutical companies is sensitive research because information in such organisations has economic value.

Sociological research focuses on professionals not because they are interesting entities but because there is a need to understand their power, how they operate and their roles in the construction of knowledge in society. While it is important to focus on giving voice to those Foucault refers to as the subjugated (Duke, 2002), care must be taken that doing so does not result in social research that ignores researching those in high positions in the social hierarchy. Therefore, it is important that research focuses on 'researching up' as well as well as 'researching down' (Gusterson, 1993). Analysing the role of corporate professionals in social research provides an opportunity to understand the extent of their power and how those subject to it may challenge it; hence the need for social scientific research focus on professionals (Plesner, 2011).

Gaining access to the participants is an important aspect of the research process because it is related to people in a particular location with power (Foucault, 1982). Institutions, particularly corporate institutions, are good examples for a locale of power, therefore, gaining access into multinational corporations to undertake research is obviously a political, complex, difficult and lengthy process (Bryman, 2008). The term 'corporate organisations' in this paper refers to regulatory bodies, industry associations, pharmaceutical companies and Contract Research Organisations (CROs). Like all other institutions, these organisations have rules and gate keepers that include investors, shareholders, CEOs and in some cases politicians, who are entrusted with maximising dividends and protecting their businesses interests (Rajan, 2007). These gate keepers make the rules about access and initial decisions as to whether a researcher should be allowed access to their premises (Barker and Weller, 2003; Buchanan and Bryman, 2007). They may also guard themselves in such a way that they cannot be scrutinized. Their main concerns are to ensure that their businesses are not portrayed negatively and that any secrets are kept and not revealed to the public.

Obtaining access is complicated in any research study, particularly research that involves accessing participants from public or private institutions (Fitz and Halpin, 1994). Academic discussions around challenges to accessing powerful groups for social research have primarily focused on researchers who have contacts in organisations in which they wish to conduct research or in a field where the researcher has prior knowledge and expertise (Duke, 2002; Walford, 2011). Access without any prior contact or links is simply viewed as complex and no details on complexity and how these could be handled is provided. What these views negate is that ECRs, and probably some established researchers too, sometimes have to do research in institutions they have no prior contacts or associations with,

hence, they may not have the privilege of contacts and social capital in that field (Bourdieu, 1989). As a result it becomes harder or a matter of luck for them to gain access to corporate settings. Another issue that makes access even more challenging is that the process of gaining access in corporate settings often involves hierarchical systems that require negotiation, including the multi-professional teams involved in the actual administration of the clinical trials (Fitz and Halpin, 1992; Duke, 2004) who may have other demands or interests. Working with such a diverse group of professionals ultimately requires an awareness of the complex power relations at play and the skill to present research ideas in a way that does not seem to threaten the interests and positions of individuals and institutions (Walford, 2011; Ozga, 2011; Williams, 1989).

The following section provides a reflexive account of methodological and practical experiences of undertaking a PhD on regulatory and ethical issues in human clinical trials through a lens of sociological theories of thought collectives and secrecy.

Methodological choices doing research in corporate medical settings

To explore the issues discussed above the research adopted a qualitative approach. This is because qualitative research is useful in providing a contextual understanding of the regulatory and ethical process in a way that research based on quantitative methods could not. Qualitative methods are useful in providing a contextualised exploration of conflicts, contradictions, innovations and policy implementation in practice (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Cohen et al., 2000). Field work and qualitative data collection for this research was conducted between February 2012 and March 2013.

The participants in this research were professionals from regulatory bodies, clinical CROs – companies which pharmaceutical companies contract to conduct clinical trials on their behalf. I interviewed seven regulatory officials and five professionals working in CROs and 35 healthy volunteers. Interviews were semi-structured focusing on the perceptions and experiences of risk in clinical trials. Three interviews with regulators, two with professionals and ten with healthy volunteers were over the phone or via Skype while the rest were face to face interviews. Whether over the phone or face to face, interviews took place at a time and place that was convenient to the participant. However, face to face interviews with regulators took place in their offices or somewhere in the workplace. Interviews were recorded and notes taken during interviews, except on three occasions where the participants refused to be recorded. In such instances data depended mainly on notes taken during the interview. Documentary analysis provided the basis for analysing existing guidelines and was also useful in informing the interview part of the research.

Methodological issues that arose were mainly to do with access and sampling, which will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

However, suffice to say here that the sample was based purely on availability and snowball sampling techniques. Thus the aim of the research was not to generalise findings but to develop an understanding of the UK context with regard to human involvement in clinical trials. I, however, had to be aware of my own prejudices about the industry and how the context in which interviews took place may have impacted the research. For instance, the fact that the participants were predominately white middle-class, who were being interviewed in their high-class and stylish offices, environments which were alien to me, therefore could have impacted my research, particularly my interpretation of the participants' attitudes and their answers to my questions.

This paper is a reflective account of my experiences in dealing with corporate professionals in negotiating access, their influence on the research and the ethical dilemmas that arose in the process. In sharing this experience I am aware that the challenges I encountered are not unique to my research but can be experienced by others in conducting research in other institutions. However, the responses I received may be unique to my experience and I hope this will provide some inspiration to others planning to conduct research in corporate organisational settings.

The reality of conducting research in corporate medical settings

This section looks at two themes that arose in the process of doing research: access and professional power. To illustrate these two themes, examples were extracted from email exchanges and quotes from interviews with professionals.

The challenges of gaining access

As discussed in the literature review above, access to corporations is important for research to take place (Bryman, 2008; Walford, 2011). In addition, social scientists are bound to ethical guidelines which require transparency. More precisely, participants have to be well informed about the research, including details of their role in the research and what the purpose of the research is (Bryman, 2012). Gaining access to the elite is challenging as they can easily refuse to grant access thereby keeping themselves beyond reach and scrutiny (Fitz and Halpin, 1992; Duke, 2002). In my research, gate keeping took different forms. For instance, personal assistants (PAs) needed convincing to gain access to talk to or to schedule a meeting with their superiors. Beyond PAs, in some cases, there were chief executives who had to sanction the meeting or appointment.

However, while aware of the potential difficulties, I naively thought the process would be less problematic and was expecting professionals to be willing to share their experiences. In order to identify participants, I searched company websites by looking at job descriptions of company staff. I contacted the staff involved in recruiting volunteers or managing clinical

trial units and those involved in running clinical trials. In keeping with ethical principles of transparency I emailed the selected individuals to ask for access and furnished them with details of the aims and purpose of the research. Where participants were identified, contacted and provided with details of the research project, I either received no reply or refusals. While I expected this to be the case to some degree, in reality an unreasonably high number of rejections and no replies were received. The replies were uniform. Below is a sample email extract:

...thank you for your email and the questions, they are interesting and insightful. After discussions with my team we have decided that we do not have capacity to attend to guests such as yourself at our facilities besides the questions you are proposing to ask are what we already ask our staff and volunteers... (Professional A)

This illustrates how negotiating access can be extremely problematic and, obviously, having contacts makes gaining access easier (Walford, 2011; Duke, 2002) as it makes the initial contact easier as gatekeepers are less likely going to be suspicious with someone who knows someone within the corporation. Therefore, considering that time was running out and access had to be obtained in one way or another, I decided to change the communication tactics. I identified more potential participants via the professional networking site LinkedIn. The selection was based on job titles and roles in the industry such as involvement in administering, managing or running clinical trial units. In addition, I searched their publications and research interests. Using all this information I re-wrote project summaries to match their interest and, where necessary, I cited their publications in the summary (Thomas, 1993; Duke, 2002). These personalised summaries were sent out to all those identified and even those who had not responded to previous emails. After sending this information, five participants responded expressing a willingness to grant access. See the following email extract:

... Thanks for your e-mail. I would be happy to talk to you about my experience of working with healthy volunteers in first-in-human clinical trials... I suggest that you might telephone me on the number below, at a time that suits both of us. Currently, I can offer the following... (Professional B)

The rate at which access was granted following this change in approach was interesting and provided a conundrum about conducting research with professionals. Going through this process led me to reflect on the nature of social research. While ethical considerations may encroach upon the conduct of social research, they are not the only aspect that intrudes on the research. Rather, the wider social and moral expectations, including who the researcher is (such as being a PhD student) and their experience or qualifications shape how research is organised and conducted (Bryman, 2012; Duke, 2002). However, this does not mean that ECRs may

not ask questions or explore the sensitive topics they wish to research. Rather, in order to conduct social research, ECRs like all other researchers must be willing to confront the challenging ethical and often moral questions that come with dealing with sensitive topics and participants. The following section discusses encounters with corporate professionals when conducting social research.

Entering another world?

To get to the office building from a bustling Victoria station one has to negotiate and duck the many bodies in the way, put up with the noisy traffic on the streets and avoid one or two charity fundraisers. This is an Ivory Tower, you know... (Professional F)

Professionals especially those working in corporate organisations are very visible. Their names are on company websites, they are also in the media and now in an age of professional networking sites, the details of corporate professionals may also be found online (Duke, 2002). Professionals working in corporate organisations also often use modern buildings in cities. These buildings are usually tall, often iconic and symbolic of cities in modern society. Made of see-through glass, on the ground floor passers-by can see through the glass walls. However, as Thomas (1993) argues, visibility both in the media and through buildings does not necessarily mean accessibility. Access into corporate organizations is difficult. There are PAs, security guards, receptionists to report to and visitors are not allowed through the doors until their host comes to pick them. In addition, to meet the host in the building the visitor has to negotiate security scanners. All these act as barriers to entry.

This is deliberately described in detail to illustrate that the barriers that have to be negotiated to access corporate professionals for social research. It is also to show that the capability professionals have to limit access is not only in their ability to refuse to be interviewed. Rather, it is equally in symbols, processes and structures, such as secure and guarded doors, and strict limited admittance policy to their office buildings among others (Fitz and Halpin, 1992).

In addition, the quote at the beginning of this section shows how professionals perceive outsiders who come into their premises to ask questions. They view themselves as being in an ivory tower and, in my view, the outside world then is seen as a nuisance that should be barred and kept out at all costs. This insider-outsider dichotomy is the basis for some encounters and discussions with professionals in these settings. The research encounter is a power relationship between the researcher and the participants (Scott, 1984; Hunter, 1995; Ball, 1994; Maguire and Ball, 1994). As Fitz and Halpin (1994) state, the power of the professionals is even more vivid as research has to take place in their offices, which are obviously alien and may be intimidating to the researchers. Encounters with corporate

professionals in their offices also demonstrated how professionals can act as guardians of the discourse of the subject being interrogated. They defined the terms on which the interview took place, what was said or who spoke and how it was said. Asking one of my participants if it was possible to talk to other people on his team about their experiences and views on the subject, the response suggested I would gain nothing new from interviewing others:

...I have no idea why you think talking to more people in my team will give you more information, what I will tell you is what everyone else will tell you in my team. So there is no need to talk to more people... (Professional D)

This demonstrates that doing research with corporate professionals involves negotiating not just the physical barriers of access but also negotiating official systems, such as positions and hierarchy in organisations that determine who speaks, what and when. In limiting access, professionals clearly indicate that there are things that should never be public. The levels of secrecy went even further. At the end of each interview I would ask my participants for names of people they thought were important for me to interview. Even when they knew people whom I could talk to they claimed I would not learn anything new or different from their colleagues. On only one occasion this question yielded a positive response. All other participants said they did not know anybody. This shows that professionals can be in tightly knit esoteric communities and will shield each other from public scrutiny. However, the irony here is that they occupy and operate from the most modern buildings in city centres. The buildings are made of glass and one can see through from the streets yet they are not transparent with information or willing to answer questions about their practices (Fleck, 1935; Thomas, 1993).

What I found useful in these settings was identifying those who wielded the power. As might be expected some members of the organisations might not be actively involved in the decision-making process as they maybe on the fringes. Because of this, identifying those who were at the core of the esoteric circle was useful. Dealing with such people facilitated easy access especially after finding some common ground. For example, in one case I contacted the operations manager who was responsible for the day to day operations of the unit rather than the doctor who was conducting the trials. In addition, corporate professional participants are usually interested in knowing who else the researcher spoke to (Duke, 2002). In my experience this was even more challenging because of the nature of the business my participants were involved in. In some cases I managed to give inexplicit general answers while in other cases I openly told the participants that due to confidentiality I could not disclose names. Giving such responses gave the participants confidence that they could rely on me with information and hence agreed to an interview.

Power: Corporate professional influences on the research

In the literature discussed above it is suggested that research conducted in corporate institutions is imbued with power relations. I suggested that professionals and institutions can influence the conduct of research. In this section I outline my experience in conducting research in this context.

Influence on research design and data collection

'a method is the road after one has travelled it' (Ginzburg, 1993: 75)

Ginsburg's assertion illustrates that social research methods can only be clearly defined as methods after we have conducted the research. This is because they are liable to change in the process of doing research. In the literature section above, I discussed how corporate professionals in positions of power may have an influence over what and how social research is conducted (Walford, 2011; Bryman, 2012). In this study the initial plans for the research were to conduct a qualitative multi-sited ethnographic study with some observations on the professionals at workplace. Observations were intended to aid exploration of the policy implementations and practices. However, encounters with two different gate keepers quickly changed that. The professionals argued that the method was not ideal in their opinion. Instead they stated that if they were to support the project it should be a quantitative study. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

The only way to do this project is for you to prepare a questionnaire that would be sent out to all those on our register, that's all, no such thing as interviews, no one will talk to you considering the numbers you want. (Professional F)

We can support a survey type of research but access into our premises for interviews is not possible... (Professional A)

In the extract above, the gate keepers felt qualitative research was not an ideal approach even when they were told of the rationale for the approach. Based on their corporate professional disciplinary background of biomedical science, the only way to do research is to collect quantitative data. A further analysis of the conversations also shows that using their suggested approach was not about getting the best method but was about attempting to adjust the research in a way that would be convenient for them. In addition, it meant that the professionals would get rid of me as quickly as possible as I would not be 'hanging around' their premises.

After some negotiations a questionnaire was included as a recruitment tool as I insisted interviews would add more to the research outcomes than conducting questionnaires with pre-determined answers. After negotiations questionnaires were used for recruiting volunteers in some cases but not for the professionals. Incorporating a survey into my methods meant that only certain questions were asked and to a limited

depth. With the inclusion of questionnaires as a recruitment tool my research approach changed from a sociological ethnography to a mixed method study, with very brief observations. I therefore found myself with quantitative data I had not anticipated. While it is acceptable in social research to change methods due to circumstances, what is significant here is that I adjusted my methods as a result of a direct and non-negotiable process. The issue was not that I could not interview staff and volunteers. It may have been that they did not want to have conversations with people that could possibly reveal things they would otherwise want kept secret. However, the inclusion of the questionnaires was very useful as it provided valuable demographic data for my research project.

Another influence gate-keepers exerted on the research design was related to the content of the questions that I had to ask the participants. In most cases participants requested to look at questions in advance, which resulted in doctoring the interview schedule and questionnaires. A few times I was told not to ask certain questions during the interviews, while on the questionnaire they removed questions they were not comfortable with. See extract below.

...we do not deal with uncertainty and risks in our work. We are sure of what we are doing. So you are not asking these questions ... alright? (Professional F)

This was not a request but an outright command to change my interview questions and remove questions on safety and uncertainty. They were uncomfortable with questions about safety as this would have been interrogating their safety record, while for the volunteers it would have been reminders of their safety experiences. This is an issue of public interest in relation to medical research but it is obviously not in the interest of pharmaceutical companies or CROs. Therefore, secrecy and limitation of access had implications on the quality and depth of the data collected. The influence of professionals on research goes beyond influencing the research approaches and questions. In addition to shaping the questions, the mode of data collection equally changed. The participants and gate keepers decided who will be involved, where, for how long and what information they would give me.

Thank you for your email. I have been clear that there will be no contact with volunteers without our supervision. The interviews will be over the phone lasting no more than 15 minutes and we will provide the space and telephone for you to use. You will not be given their contact details nor will they be asked to give them to you... (Professional F)

The above quotes and discussion relates to ways in which professionals as participants in research shape the research design and conduct of the research. Therefore, conducting research in such settings

requires perseverance and flexibility, sticking to plans were necessary and being flexible where you can.

Rapport-building

Building rapport was one of the problems I encountered when conducting interviews or during meetings to discuss access. While research training alludes to the importance of building rapport with participants to get them on board and develop an understanding, the practical experience of doing research was very different. I found that in these settings there was no time for rapport-building as elites were abrasive and disinterested in the individual doing the research. Instead they were focused solely on what they could do to help and time was usually very short. This was often made clear at the beginning of most encounters with statements such as:

I am very busy and only have 15 minutes so let's cut to the chase.
What can I do for you?

or, better still,

I am sorry I forgot you were coming can we rearrange to meet next week?

These coupled with the fact that research takes place in their premises, places which were obviously alien to me, added to the intimidating atmosphere. In addition, the research involved asking questions about views on practices they often seemed uncomfortable to answer. As a result the participants took a combative or dismissive approach. In other instances the participants took control of the research by starting to dictate the terms on which the research was to take place. In some cases I found that some participants tried to patronise me by trying to put me off asking questions by not answering them and redirecting the focus of the interviews to other questions. They also made deliberate attempts to make sure I knew my place and tried to talk down the significance of my study. This can be seen in the quote below:

...Who are your supervisors? I must say that if they had any idea about ethics and how the industry works they would have advised you not to embark on this journey. What I am saying is that this project is not possible. No one, I repeat no one, will talk to you or answer any of the questions you are asking. I am doing you a favour to save you from ... you know... heartache in future... (Professional H)

The above quote illustrates two things. It demonstrates, firstly, the difficulty in accessing corporate professionals for research and, secondly, the power and influence powerful individuals have when involved in different forms of social research.

'Corporate line' as a hurdle

Conducting research involving corporate professionals was characterised by constrained interviews with participants responding to questions by giving official responses rather than their own views. However, it should be noted that although in some cases some of their concerns were justifiable, in other cases they clearly were not. This brings me to the other challenge of doing research with corporate professionals as participants. Participants were likely to be wary of the interview and thus were often giving constrained corporate responses to questions about their views. In one case a participant warned that if I wanted to ask professionals their views I will not get anyone to participate in my research unless I focused on their official views. In two other instances despite assuring participants of anonymity, participants refused to have the interview recorded because they wanted the conversations to be off record. Though this made me free to ask questions, their responses were still official and what they said was not so different from what others had said to me and some things were actually public knowledge. As Thomas (1993) found, it was important for the participants to be assured that their contribution will be treated as sensitive as they would not want to be quoted as having said certain things. Therefore allowing them to talk off the record while I profusely took notes seemed to make them happy to share the knowledge they had.

Furthermore, when I succeeded in getting them to talk, another issue surfaced. Participants wanted to know how much I knew about their work or politics around the subject. While this seemed like a good thing it actually had implications. I found some professionals wanted to talk to someone they could educate (Duke, 2002). Therefore, if you came across as knowledgeable they would think that there was no need for the interview since I had the knowledge. However, for other professionals knowledge on the subject was a sign of preparedness and made them enthusiastic to respond to the questions. Consequently, for this type of participants if I indicated that I did not know the subject and needed to prepare before interviews they were less inclined to continue with the interview. This meant that I constantly found myself in very awkward situations as I had to carefully determine when to be seen as knowledgeable and when not to. In some cases this shifting between being seen as 'knowing' and being seen as 'naive' (Duke, 2002) worked and in some cases it backfired. In one instance I was asked if I had read the history to the changes of the Medicines for Human Use Act in reference to first-in-human clinical trials. My initial assessment of this encounter was that my participant would have liked to teach me things so I decided to play 'naïve'. I was surprised because my participant said I had some home work to do before I could go around asking questions. This prompted some quick backtracking on my part to explain that I did not quite get the question. Another issue in relation to dealing with corporate responses was that in most cases I had to wrestle for control of the interview as some professionals tended to want to swap roles by assuming the

interviewers role. This was awkward but after some subtle replies I would take the role of the interviewer back.

These experiences were in sharp contrast to my encounters with professionals in public institutions, though access to them was difficult in other ways. I found that civil servants were keen to have discussions about the topic and answer my questions. In some cases they offered to talk to someone they knew in the industry working for private firms, to see if they could participate. None of their efforts materialised but their willingness to participate was interesting. It showed the differences in professional views about knowledge production. For civil servants, knowledge production was seen as a public good while for professionals in private corporations it was a personal and commercial good that should be kept private (Stiglitz, 1999). The issue with secrets is that they tend to give those who hold power and control over certain aspects of knowledge the ability to avoid being scrutinized.

Conclusion

In sum, the findings showed that secrecy is maintained in the pharmaceutical research industry through the structural organisation of the industry and the environment in which professionals individually use dynamic and innovative approaches to keep information from getting into the public domain. These approaches include the use of their positions as experts, their PAs and creating barriers to access to their premises for research. The discussion supports Fleck's observations about the social construction of knowledge. Specifically that at the core of the medical knowledge production process as the experts who have been given some empirical substantiation. What the paper demonstrates is that there are tensions between the corporate tendency to keep secrets and social researchers' demands for transparency and access to conduct research. Therefore social research, specifically requests for access from social scientists, are viewed mostly as a threat rather than as promising a better understanding of corporate medical knowledge production. The thought styles of corporate medical professionals have a unified response to outside interrogations of their practice, namely secrecy. Though working in different organisations, based on this sample, a culture of secrecy can be seen in the respondents to this research. Professionals in corporate medical settings are suspicious of outsiders, particularly those who ask questions about their practices. Therefore they will do everything to protect their interest and each other from public scrutiny. It is here that Fleck's model of thought collectives becomes clearly exemplified.

In conclusion, research involving professionals is complex and raises a lot of ethical issues such as rapport-building and secrecy in research. These in turn have an impact on the research design, research questions and the conduct of the research itself. This paper is a reflexive account and has

accentuated my experiences in conducting research in corporate organisational settings. It has considered how the conduct of research with these participants in corporate settings raises questions about the relationship between transparency, ethics and knowledge production in research. These questions arise from the power relations that are inherent in the relationship between the researcher and the informants and how these could be investigated. As Thomas (1993) states, there are no easy answers to the ethical questions that arise in such processes, therefore, researchers have to make judgements as and when they are confronted with these issues. Indeed questions such as 'is it possible to carry out good research while sticking strictly to values of ethical research if informants are not transparent?' or 'how much information should be given to informants while negotiating access?' have no easy answers. However, in presenting a reflexive account, the paper has highlighted the political, paradoxical and uncertain nature of research involving professionals, but also how persistence eventually pays off.

This paper has also shown that to gain the confidence of professionals in corporate settings, social researchers have to think about the impact and significance the research has for the organizations in which research will be carried out. Therefore, in the research design process consideration should be given to what could be offered to participating organizations. Although the experiences I had during the field work were disconcerting, they were useful experiences because the encounters and official responses provided valuable data for reflecting on conducting research that includes people in powerful positions. In doing so, it provided a basis for reflecting on the relationship between secrecy and knowledge production.

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