Clip 7: Open and closed settings

I'm going to talk about whether access to closed settings is necessarily more difficult to achieve than access in open settings.

The first thing I would point out is that whilst there are particular opportunities and potentials associated with both closed and open settings, the type of setting that you utilise will largely be decided by its relevance to the research question. With that in mind, closed settings are usually those that require some sort of permission to enter. Indeed, access to closed settings is often seen to have an added layer of complexity in that they require proprietary agreement just to get in. As you can imagine this process might often be fraud with difficulty primarily because those fields you are trying to gain access to will have very different goals to yourself.

So, in order to access formal organisations such as schools, local government agencies for example you will need to negotiate with the organisation in question to get through the front door. Obviously, your research isn't their first priority. Indeed there is actually a term, a gatekeeper, for those people who are able to control access to a field site but don't actually provide data to a research project. However, more informal settings will also often require access to be negotiated, sometimes even have presence of gatekeeper. If I was doing a project that was interested in the domestic arrangement of a student household and the division of labour within that setting, I would need permission for those within the house in order to conduct my research.

On the other hand, open settings are those where permission to enter is not required, they exist in the public rather than the private sphere. A study on football culture for instance does not require that I gain explicit permission from a particular football fan club to visit a match or even a local match pub before or after a game. However, whilst open settings might seem to be the easier option to actually get into they are much of a less captive market and much effort will required to gather meaningful data, particularly if the research questions require a much more engaged role for the researcher. Whilst some researchers might be looking after formal gatekeepers or key informants who are able to show them the way finding them is actually the case of luck rather than design.

Now all that said, whether the setting is opened or closed access is something that will need to be continuously negotiated. Field relationships can be complicated; people might be suspicious of your motives 'Are you management or government?' for instance. Issues of trust are also important and you might have to explain what you will do with the data and what they say in order to win that trust. After all, why should anyone speak to you? More often than not, it's more unlikely to be of any benefit to them. Field sites can often be subject to relationship breakdown too. We are after all dealing with human nature and not everyone will get on with each other. So you may have to develop particular fronts, pass tests and talk yourself up to negotiate these difficulties regardless of whether it's an open or closed setting. In many cases you might have to do with whatever comes to hand. Indeed it's one thing to have digital access to a setting, it's quite another to have social access and both can be revoked at any time.

Now on top of all this, it's also worth mentioning that you have to do all of this without contravening the ethical frameworks that you are working within. Indeed given the closeness of relationships that can develop within a field retaining a sense of ethical practice is essential when negotiating the demands of fieldwork but you can make sure you are familiar with the literature should anything arise.