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# Gaining access and establishing trust in a fieldwork with psychiatric patients

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper has two-pronged of objectives: firstly, to know the gatekeepers and their significant roles; and secondly, to share the workable strategies in building rapport and gaining access to the social institution, particularly the studied context. The research was undertaken at public hospitals in Pulau Pinang and Kedah, Malaysia on 37 respondents. The preliminary finding suggested that the gatekeepers play important roles to maintain the status quo in the mental health care. However, compromises are vital to ensure the accessibility to the potential respondents.

*Keywords:* Access; Ethics; Gatekeeper; Psychiatric patients; Rapport; Trust

## 1. Introduction

Research on the vulnerable group from the perspective of service users is merely important to improve service arrangement, particularly in public hospitals (Pyer and Campbell, 2012). Most often than not, people diagnosed with mental illness such as depressive patients are both voiceless and powerless in the realm of service reform (Corrigan, Powell, and Michaels, 2014; El Enany, Currie, and Lockett, 2013; Lasalvia et al., 2013; Kilian et al., 2003). The underrepresentation of people diagnosed with mental illness might pronounce marginalization of their roles as a member of social institutions. This situation promotes services and facilities that are not meant for their needs, since

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their thoughts are systematically muted. In the same vein, stigma plays an important role to eliminate the vulnerable group from the mainstream. Take, for example, patients diagnosed with mental illness are often associated with being 'dangerous, unpredictable and violent' (Drew et al., 2011). The deviant label comes with the negative connotation that potential discriminate them socially, economically and culturally (Corrigan and Shapiro, 2010). This in turn causes the patients and caregivers becoming more vigilant towards "outsiders" and getting access to fieldwork might be challenging for the social scientist. With the above arguments, the article was written as a fieldwork reflection to address two-pronged of objectives. Firstly, to address the gatekeepers and their significant roles and secondly to suggest some strategies for accessing the field.

## 2. Ethical and Governance processes

The research was conducted in Malaysian setting with a particular interest drawn upon the research question on how patients diagnosed with depressive symptoms experience services provided in the out-patient psychiatric clinic. Several inclusive criteria had been set up for sampling purpose such as aged 18 and above; currently diagnosed with depression or major depressive disorder, with or without co-morbidity; and has been on follow-up at least 12 months at the out-patient clinic. Two public hospitals in North Malaysia were considered for the study. Prior to gaining consent for the fieldwork, the research had undergone at least two ethical review applications. The applications were made in tandem with the other to the Malaysian Ministry of Health (MOH) and the university's ethical body, namely the Research Ethics Committee (Human) of Universiti Sains Malaysia (JEPeM).

## 3. Confronting the gatekeepers

As a social scientist, the interest of understanding the issues and challenges faced by patients diagnosed with mental illness are potent to ensure fairness and just treatments included under the inclusiveness flagship. Recently in Malaysia, the positive development of acknowledging patients diagnosed with mental illnesses who are struggling with mental and physical impairments is perceived as an important breakthrough to inclusiveness movement. With this, they are entitled financial aid from the government, apart from the privilege of enjoying public service discounts. On the other hand, they are still vulnerable in many aspects and protection while undergoing research protocols deemed necessary, as quoted in the Declaration of Helsinki:

> Some groups and individuals are particularly vulnerable and may have an increased likelihood of being wronged or of incurring additional harm. All vulnerable groups and individuals should receive specifically considered protection. (World Medical Association, 2015)

With the above assurance from the Declaration of Helsinki, the ethical clearance can turn out to be a can of worms for some (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland, 2006). In the case of the research, the study underwent several gatekeepers in negotiating access, both formal and informal, and it took approximately five months for the whole process before obtaining the approvals.

### 3.1. The Ministry of Health (MOH)

MOH is the first gatekeeper that the researchers needed to go through. Any research interest to study on human subject, or being in the MOH premises, or using the facilities should undergo ethical clearance from the ministry. Through The National Medical Research Register (NMRR), MOH effort to integrate the application for ethical review, can be applauded. The database and the support system are both stable and helpful for novice researchers especially from non-medical backgrounds who are unaware of the medical jargons in the field, or do not know where to locate necessary information online.