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Spins, Stalls, and Shutdowns:
Pitfalls of Qualitative Policing and Security Research

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Abstract: This article explores key elements of qualitative research on policing and security agencies, including barriers encountered and strategies to prevent them. While it is oft-assumed that policing/security agencies are difficult to access due to their clandestine or bureaucratic nature, this article demonstrates this is not necessarily the case, as access was gained for three distinct qualitative research projects. Yet, access and subsequent research were not without pitfalls, which we term security spins, security stalls, and security shutdowns. We illustrate how each was encountered and argue these pitfalls are akin to researchers falling into risk categories, not unlike those used by policing/security agents in their work. Before concluding we discuss methodological strategies for scholars to avoid these pitfalls and to advance research that critically interrogates the immense policing/security realm.

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1. Introduction

Policing and security research has grown since the events of September 11 2001 across disciplines in which qualitative inquiry is prevalent, including sociology, criminology, and geography. The reach and scope of existing policing/security agencies has been widening, often through new laws granting agencies greater powers of search, surveillance, and arrest so as to operate beyond their traditional purview (EARL, 2009; ERICSON, 2007; JOCHELSON, KRAMAR & DOERKSEN, 2014). Some agencies, such as corporate security units and campus security services, remain understudied despite their long histories. These agencies are becoming networked, that is, increasingly collaborating and sharing information that identifies risky spaces and persons consistent with their particular agency's mandate, categories, and needs. If as GREENE (2014) puts it, research on and with policing (and security) agencies is like trying to master the tango, then the more frequent networking and growing reach of these organizations is adding erratic beats and requiring fancier footwork for researchers. The question

is how best to approach and access these agencies, since, as we show, studying these agencies can involve unique challenges. Yet, it is because of these agencies' growing penetration of everyday life, including their surveillance of online communications and private leisure activities, and their actions' potentially deleterious effects on one's life chances if one is labeled risky, assaulted, arrested, or imprisoned that research in this realm is as necessary as ever. [1]

Such research is challenging from the outset because policing/security agencies are particularly secret, secured, or otherwise difficult to access by scholars interested in how they operate, through what rationales, with what effects, and how these aspects may be shifting. It was famously noted by Max WEBER (1946 [1922]) that state bureaucracies have this propensity for secrets, as do legal institutions (SCHEPPELE, 1988), research centers (STEGMAIER, 2015), and private corporations (PENDERS, VERBAKEL & NELIS, 2009) more broadly. To be sure, these pitfalls are similar to those found in other public and private agencies or organizations, such as private corporations and universities, which have been accessed through special arrangements and strategies that have been systematically contemplated and advocated by researchers (PENDERS et al., 2009; STEGMAIER, 2015). Research on other criminal justice agencies, such as prisons, has documented similar blockages and barriers (MARTEL, 2004; YEAGER, 2008). Yet, we would argue that policing/security agencies are well-equipped to be secretive, sometimes taking this to extremes, because they can use security as a rationale for what they do and thus as a means of avoiding scrutiny whenever deemed useful. Thus police and security personnel are sometimes not only reluctant respondents (ADLER & ADLER, 2002) but also trained to evade questioning or avoid full disclosure when participating in research. Thus, we think these agencies deserve special attention. In light of these dynamics and challenges, we explore pressing questions for qualitative policing and security researchers. How best can a researcher gain access to policing/security agencies? If they can, how does one avoid getting drawn or falling into the risk categories that are the stock and trade of these agencies? What kinds of pitfalls are encountered and what happens when one falls in? And how can qualitative researchers step over or climb out? The questions asked by qualitative researchers differ from those of quantitative researchers in demanding greater access to internal workings and nuances of the agencies that quantitative data rarely reveals on its own and to deal with it more systematically than, for example, journalists.[1] By attempting to answer these questions this article contributes to qualitative research literature on policing/security practices (ALISON, SNOOK & STEIN, 2001; ARADAU, HUYSMANS, NEAL & VOELNER, 2014; BELUR, 2014; BREWER, 1990; FASSIN, 2013; HOOGENBOOM & PUNCH, 2012; SALTER & MUTLU, 2012; VAN MANNEN, 1981). [2]

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1 Although corporate security and campus security have not been of interest to journalists as of yet, this is not true of paid duty arrangements in a major city of interest and thus this gives a basis of comparison. Unlike journalistic research, however, our research relies on multiple methods of data collection (see WALBY & LIPPERT, 2015). Further, it not only considers the costs to the taxpayer of these arrangements, seemingly intended to shock a readership and sell newspapers, but also considers other key research questions and draws upon theoretically informed insights from the policing and security literature.

Policing/security agencies are often presumed difficult to access due to their secret or enclosed nature (e.g., behind a blue wall). However, we argue this is not necessarily the case, and that access may be no more onerous than for other public organizations (e.g., health care organizations). This article reveals that for three distinct qualitative projects in English Canada, access was gained to policing/security services. Our research experiences also demonstrate, however, that this access and research is not without pitfalls. Inspired by contributions that call for honest accounts of the trials and tribulations of the qualitative research process (FINE, 1993; KATZ, 2004; TRACEY, 2010), we identify three kinds of pitfalls encountered in one or more of these projects, what we term security spins, security stalls, and security shutdowns. These were experienced in relation to three qualitative methods: field/ethnographic research, personal interviews, and informal and formal (freedom of information [FOI], access to information [ATI]) information requests. As discussed below, we used multiple strategies for producing data because of acknowledged limits to knowing in qualitative research (DOUCET & MAUTHNER, 2008; HONAN, KNOBEL, BAKER & DAVIES, 2000) and the attendant need for triangulation (HARARI & BEATY, 1990). Traditional questionnaire research with police/security personnel may explore attitudes but often does not fully reveal the organization of police/security strategies and practices over time. Yet with triangulation it becomes trickier to interpret data (MORAN-ELLIS et al., 2006), and pitfalls emerge that can threaten project completion. These pitfalls stem from how policing and security agents and agencies manage risk in their work routines. [3]

This article unfolds in three parts. First, we review literature on access in police research and elaborate our notions of security spins, security stalls, and security shutdowns. Then we examine data and field notes that illustrate these challenges and barriers and how we managed them in these contexts in English Canada. Our analysis adds to debates in this journal on strategies for research access, recruitment, and sampling in qualitative research (see BLODGETT, BOYER & TURK, 2005; GUETTERMAN, 2015; MALACHOWSKI, 2015; McCOSKER, BARNARD & GERBER, 2001). Finally, with the aim of contributing to literature about the quality of qualitative research (LINCOLN, 1995; SEALE, 1999; TRACEY, 2010), we discuss strategies for policing/security scholars contemplating similar qualitative research and how to best avoid these pitfalls. [4]

2. Challenges in Qualitative Research on Policing and Security

Literature on qualitative studies of policing organizations (ALISON et al., 2001; BREWER, 1990; COCKCROFT, 2005; FASSIN, 2013) has examined issues of information management and the challenges of working with secretive agencies. Of course, classic ethnographic studies of policing by BITTNER (1970), ERICSON (1981), MANNING (1977), among others, are foundational for police studies. But security agencies such as those we report on below differ from public police. Different challenges in negotiating access can arise depending on the topic or method being used. New contributions that explore research methods in security studies (ARADAU et al., 2014; LISLE, 2014; RAPPERT, 2010; SALTER & MUTLU, 2012) have explained discursive and ethnographic approaches to

qualitative research in the post-September 11 era. Yet few contributions in this policing/security literature overall have considered the routine ways that research access is mitigated and blocked, especially not from a perspective that entails multiple data production strategies. [5]

Seeking access to policing/security agencies is varied in aspiration and scope. For the three research projects described below, sometimes the aim was to merely access documents representative of agency practices or that described a subset of agencies' programs. Other times it involved accessing personnel for face-to-face, semi-structured interviews about their agencies and their work and occasionally telephone interviews (HOLT, 2010) when preferred by personnel. At times it also entailed accessing agencies over a longer term and following agents around during their work as shadows (DE LEON & COHEN, 2005; McDONALD, 2005). [6]

Contrary to expectations regarding the nature of policing/security agencies, access was gained to these agencies, including in two projects to security agents in the field. This is despite the fact that we are real outsiders who conduct critical, academic research (see THOMAS, 2014 for a discussion of types of police researchers). Our critical position on security practices by the agencies we researched below is, first, that what is practiced in the name of "security" has grown considerably, especially since September 11, 2001. Second, our position is that practices sometimes termed "security" are actually an effort to "govern through security," that is using security as an excuse or pretext, wittingly or unwittingly, to accomplish all manner of outcomes, sometimes contrary to the public good or which are otherwise unaccountable (see LIPPERT & WALBY, 2015; WALBY & LIPPERT, 2015). [7]

Through carefully-crafted request letters, e-mails, telephone calls, and meetings, along with continuous researcher image self-management involving careful consideration of how one refers to oneself leading up to and after entry into the field, we gained access to most agencies we approached. This was accompanied by standard promises of confidentiality and sharing of research results where relevant. These issues of rapport and trust are important in qualitative research (BAEZ, 2002; CORBIN & MORSE, 2003; KAISER, 2009) and especially in research with police (BREWER, 1990).[2] But in many respects these agencies were no different than other public organizations; many were willing to participate after the aims of the research were outlined and safeguards put in place. This does not mean the process was without pitfalls or that they can be approached in any manner. What makes these policing/security agencies distinct is that risk management is central to what they do (ERICSON & HAGGERTY, 1997; WALBY & LIPPERT, 2015); they are experts at identifying and managing risk, thus making research about them fraught with potential problems. [8]

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2   We do not have space to examine issues of identity, power, and access in police and security research (e.g. BELUR, 2014; HORN, 1997). We recognize that gender, for instance, is a key aspect of interview encounters (SCHWALBE & WOLKOMIR, 2001) and it is a pertinent issue for us because White men dominate the corporate security sector (see WALBY & LIPPERT, 2015).

We encountered many kinds of pitfalls and ours is not an exhaustive list. But in reflecting upon our experiences in the three projects, three types stand out: security spins, security stalls, and security shutdowns. We define a security spin as an effort to redirect or reshape the meaning of particular claims, observations, and practices of a policing/security agency for the inquiring researcher. The notion of spin recognizes that these agencies compete for recognition among their security communities (WALBY & LIPPERT, 2015) and for funding from, in these instances, public sources and political or administrative masters. Claims or practices of these agencies, if their meaning is not reworked, risk damaging reputations and reducing the funding flow. These spins are an effort to manage identified reputational risks (also see HAGGERTY, 2004). Of course other public agencies have designated spin doctors attending to organizations' needs and providing remedies, a point we return to below. And certainly participants are known in qualitative research to misrepresent, pad, or rework the truth of the matter. But policing/security personnel themselves, from the manager in his or her office to the lowest level agent patrolling on the ground, can and do represent themselves and their practices in ways that may be more appealing. Merely because policing/security agencies and agents possess considerable legal powers and tend to operate with little public oversight, we found, does not mean they proceed without concern about reputational risk (see DUPONT, 2015). [9]

Security stalls are the second type of pitfall and are of a different order compared to spins. Stalls occur while negotiating access for information from policing/security agencies. Stalls seek not to reshape meaning of known policing/security agencies/agents' claims or practices but instead strive to manage reputational risk temporally by slowing information transfer to the researcher, perhaps to buy time to reshape or prepare the information. Stalls also may be presented by bureaucratic barriers, such as the requirement of administrative authorization, and may be used to manage operational risk, such as labor costs associated with participation (e.g., compiling and redacting data, facilitating, or participating in research). The former type of stalls tend to be used when revealing the information about practices is eventually legally required, as in FOI/ATI requests, and the latter in granting approval for in-depth access to personnel for interviews or observations. Both types may be used in hope the researcher will scale down or abandon the project. With stalls the researcher may still obtain data, but it requires sustained negotiation (perhaps with multiple sites) and may take long enough to threaten the feasibility of investigating a particular site or even prevent completing the entire research project. [10]

Finally, security shutdowns are the most serious of the three pitfalls and the potentially most damaging to research projects if qualitative scholars fall into them. Here risks (e.g., to reputation) have been identified by the policing/security agency or agents to be serious and too unruly for spins or stalls or that the former two pitfalls have failed. Shutdowns mean a complete lockdown of information release and are permanent. The shutdown decision is sometimes sovereign in character in that its rationale need not be communicated. Shutdowns tend to pertain to decisions by the immediate agency at only one site, rather than all similar sites controlled by other agencies. They are troubling because of the

possibility that researchers may be blacklisted by others networked to the immediate agency. We describe two shutdowns below but neither led to blacklisting. This result may speak to weak ties among agencies but may also reflect a hesitance to reveal to other network agencies that we were permitted to access the agency or that any information was transferred to us in the first instance. Not only do we demonstrate it takes wit and the introspection of reflexivity (FINLAY, 2002; GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004; RIACH, 2009) to manage these pitfalls, but in the name of promoting more reflexive policing/security research we hope our accounts help make qualitative researchers aware of similar dynamics in their projects. [11]

3. Pitfalls in Corporate Security, Campus Security, and Public Police Research

We conducted qualitative studies of three different kinds of agencies: public corporate security, campus security in public universities, and public police. In each case we engaged several of each type of agency simultaneously, a point we return to in the discussion. [12]

3.1 Corporate security

Corporate security units in large private organizations have a long history, especially in North America. Their historic association with union-busting, surveillance and violence at the Ford Motor Company in the early 20th Century is well known (WEISS, 2014). Though tactics have changed, these units remain. Today there are few, if any, major private corporations without an in-house corporate security unit. In recent years corporate security values, credentials, and practices have begun migrating into various levels of government. In the first project we sought to investigate this trend in municipal corporate security (MCS) units in 17 Canadian cities (WALBY & LIPPERT, 2015) (For an example of one such unit, see City of Toronto Corporate Security Unit). To do this, WALBY and LIPPERT adopted a research design involving interviews with MCS representatives as well as FOI requests about these units' practices.[3] [13]

We begin with examples of shutdowns. We had been granted interviews with two key MCS personnel, one of whom was a graduate of the university program in which one researcher taught. We established rapport and there was explicit mention that we could return for in-depth follow-up research. Several weeks later our e-mail request for a follow up interview with these personnel and access to lower level personnel went unanswered, as did the next three, one of which was directed at another representative in case our contact person was on leave or had been transferred from their position. We never heard from them again. This caused concern that other agencies would act similarly or their rationale for this decision, which remains unknown or unknowable (RAPPERT, 2010), would be passed to other MCS units. It led us to accelerate our research schedule. Ultimately another Canadian MCS unit provided the access we sought. [14]

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3 There is insufficient space to discuss using FOI requests in detail here but this method has been elaborated elsewhere (SAVAGE & HYDE, 2014).

Another near shutdown we encountered during this research occurred inadvertently. The second author was delivering a public talk about security as part of a city walking tour. The tour was planned so a short lecture on MCS, once the group had arrived at the city square in Victoria, British Columbia, would be delivered. He was pontificating about the forms of surveillance MCS personnel use, their lack of identifying uniforms, and the implications for use of public space, when he noticed two MCS personnel deliberately moving through the audience. Members of the audience themselves noticed these agents' presence—their ear buds were something that the second author drew attention to midway through the talk. Several crowd members seemed shaken by the encounter with these MCS personnel, and after the two agents walked away some members criticized their intrusion. In the coming months, the MCS representative from this city was not forthcoming about completing a previously agreed upon interview, or granting interview access to MCS personnel. After he retired a year later, when reputational risks were lessened, he agreed be interviewed. Though we eventually interviewed other staff, our access was permitted only after this lengthy stall. [15]

One mundane but common and telling example of spin comes from a MCS representative being queried about the use of surveillance cameras at City Hall in another city and which we then learned we had been subjected to without our knowledge. When asked, the MCS representative spun the purpose of this surveillance camera as a security camera and claimed MCS does not conduct surveillance. It was common for corporate security personnel to explain that use of surveillance cameras was not for surveillance but for security. This distinction, which might be lost on those whom the cameras view across municipal properties, parks, etc., downplays privacy concerns associated with surveillance and seeks to manage MCS reputations by suggesting they are instead in the business of protecting public safety. [16]

Stalls also occurred when examining corporate security at other levels of government. We submitted FOI requests at the provincial level and ATI requests at the federal level to numerous departments[4]. At the provincial level, a FOI request was sent to Manitoba Hydro, that province's Crown Corporation responsible for energy utility. The request was for

> "The number and types of investigations carried out by Corporate Security in Manitoba Hydro HQ from April 1, 2011 to July 15, 2014. Sample of official job description and protocol for Corporate Security in Manitoba Hydro. Sample of reports/plans for recent, past projects of Manitoba Hydro Corporate Security. Annual reports of Corporate Security for previous four years. Annual budget and general expenditure list of Manitoba Hydro Corporate Security for previous four years." [17]

This request was mailed to the FOI Coordinator for Manitoba Hydro—this was the only designation on the envelope. After some weeks we telephoned Manitoba Hydro to speak with the FOI Coordinator. We then received a response from a

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4   We sent requests to 3 provincial departments and 13 federal departments and had 90 percent success rates.

representative who would only identify themselves as a Manitoba Hydro employee asking more details about our request. After several days the person called again, this time explaining they were the corporate security director at Manitoba Hydro and would be responding to the request. We then promptly replied that not only had this arrangement delayed the processing of the request, but it had also contravened FOI legislation due to the office of primary interest receiving our request directly and learning our identity. We explained to this corporate security director that they needed to forward the request to the FOI Coordinator, who would be charged with seeing it through. After another two weeks, the FOI Coordinator responded and apologized for the poorly developed FOI culture and breach of protocol according to the FOI legislation. The requested information was eventually disclosed. [18]

We submitted similar requests to numerous federal government departments, including the Department of National Defence. Their ATI Coordinator stalled the request by claiming this Department was without a corporate security unit. We engaged in three tense conversations with the ATI Coordinator, remarking that all federal government agencies that received the same request had so far indicated they had such a unit and would comply. Yet the ATI Coordinator insisted his Department had no such security unit, and indicated he wanted to close the file. We then spent time locating all open source material we could discover, including policy and budget documents from the Department of National Defence website that revealed the existence of their corporate security unit. Upon receiving this material, the ATI Coordinator then chose an unusual course of action by suggesting we contact the corporate security unit directly to clarify the parameters of the search. Upon doing so the corporate security unit representative then indicated the requested information was not formatted to fit the parameters of the search as per the original wording, so asked for drastic alteration of the request. We complied, and the representative eventually released some files outside of the ATI process. But he had effectively responded to the request in a way that was neither open nor forthcoming, and disclosed the information in a format that suited their interests. [19]

3.2 Campus security[5]

Unlike municipal corporate security units, campus security services at public universities in Canada have a long history. For instance, the University of Toronto Campus Community Police has operated since 1904 (for another example, see University of Calgary Campus Security). Yet little scholarly attention has been paid to the operations of campus security services (but see GOMME & MICUCCI, 1997; MICUCCI, 1998; WALBY, 2006). The third author's research examined campus security services and their practices through interviews, observations, and informal document collection (through publicly available sources and negotiation with institutional gatekeepers). This research has revealed insights on campus security legitimation work (WALBY, WILKINSON & LIPPERT, 2015) and

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5   Campus security services have various monikers. We use campus security services/personnel.

security networks (WILKINSON, 2014). Though five campus security services granted access, this research was not without pitfalls.[6] [20]

Stalls were encountered while negotiating access to research sites. One significant stall occurred at a university where submission of a formal request to conduct research involving university personnel/students was required. The proposal was rejected 22 days after being submitted by e-mail. The stated rationale was that the university could not provide the required resources and coordination necessary for the research. After receiving this rejection, the third author attempted to negotiate with representatives from the university regarding possible modifications to the research that would facilitate access. An e-mail requesting a dialogue about modifications was sent and, without any other contact made on the part of university representatives, an e-mail response was received two and a half months later that reiterated that access was denied. In this e-mail, a university administrator claimed to understand the importance of the research questions but stated that the research was "exceptionally complex and constantly evolving." This spin—the research questions were quite accessible to the layperson—and stall caused frustration as it questioned the researcher's ability to undertake the project. The claim that policing/security is "constantly evolving" questioned the utility of qualitative research that by its very nature accounts for societal issues that are in flux. After collecting data at other sites, the third author submitted a FOI request for correspondence (e.g., e-mails) and notes pertaining to this access request. In the e-mails he learned that two major concerns had been that the research would drain university resources and that the third author was a researcher from another university. This stall suggests it is not only policing/security agencies that manage risks related to research, but also that such risk management may be conducted by their administrative or political masters. Although this stall delayed his ability to enter into the field, because he had engaged in concurrent access negotiations at multiple research sites it did not compromise the project overall. [21]

Stalls were also encountered in the field when attempting to access documents. Two campus security services were forthcoming with information, including incident reports and standard operating procedures. However, at another campus security service e-mails seeking to obtain incident reports promised during an interview went unanswered. Further, the third author was only given limited access to review standard operating procedures in the campus security office. This particular stall was used to prevent operational risks, such as the release of information regarding major incident response strategies. [22]

This research also encountered spin. For example, one interviewee stated that their service do not see themselves "as an enforcement agency [but as] a problem solving agency" (Campus Security Project Interview 1). Another campus security officer stated that the word "control" was not to be used in the university setting. Rather, synonyms were to be used to be "politically correct" for university stakeholders (e.g., administrators) (Campus Security Project Interview 2). Such

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6   Due to the conditions of the research agreement, the universities studied cannot be identified
    and to protect anonymity interviewees have been given a generic identifier.

claims help campus security services downplay "any perception of excessive control," which is made necessary by campus security's need to be seen upholding or adhering to stated university values (e.g., freedom of expression, dignity, equality, etc.) (DUPONT, 2015, p.276). Campus security services may rely upon additional strategies (e.g., community engagement, crime prevention education) beyond the enforcement of state or university regulations to manage risks. Yet, downplaying "control" or "enforcement" is spin given that campus security services do engage in the enforcement of state or university regulations and other forms of control (e.g., making their presence known to deter alcohol use). This spin was overcome by interviewing members at different administrative levels within campus security, individuals outside of campus security, and observing frontline security officers. [23]

The greatest pitfall in this research, a shutdown, was encountered after arriving for fieldwork, and conducting interviews with three campus security personnel from one university. Unlike others discussed above, this shutdown was orchestrated from below; it was not administrators but instead frontline security agents with union support who shut it down. After learning of this potential shutdown from the campus security director, the third author spoke with a union representative to ease any union concerns and to avert the shutdown. However, this proved futile. Although there was no official rationale provided for this security shutdown, other events at the site provided some basis for an informed understanding of the reputational risks that lead to it. The university had recently announced plans to outsource some custodial work on campus by hiring non-unionized staff. With the collective agreement between the university and the security officers' union expiring soon the results of the research could pose risks to the security officers' collective bargaining process and to their control over campus policing/security functions. That this was recognized as a risk is confirmed in a new clause in the security officers' collective agreement, which recognizes their historical performance of policing/security tasks on campus and affirms their continuing performance of these tasks in university spaces occupied by faculty, staff, and students. The notion that site-specific politics led to this shutdown is supported by the fact that other unionized campus security personnel within universities also facing cutbacks did not raise similar objections. Further, given that policing/security agencies are often networked, to maintain trust the third author disclosed to some participants in other agencies that a shutdown had occurred but this revelation did not appear to stimulate additional concern. [24]

3.3 Public police

Public police are increasingly working for private buyers of their services in user pays policing arrangements (for an example, see Peel Regional Police Paid Duty). This development, along with that of private sponsorship of police, has raised empirical questions about the nature of policing in the early 21st century and whether it serves the public good rather than private interests (LIPPERT & WALBY, 2014). The first and second author sought to investigate this practice through interviews with public police officers and FOI requests to police services. These FOI requests sought to obtain detailed information about who the users

were and the character of the relations between officers and users, which were
found to be nightclubs, malls, and film production companies. [25]

Four municipal police services were sent FOI requests about user pays policing
or what is called pay (or paid) duty in this provincial jurisdiction's parlance. The
response varied dramatically in terms of completeness of the disclosure and the
speed with which it was made available. But the FOI request encountered a stall
from one major police service whose pay duty practices had received much
negative local media and political attention preceding our request. Given this
publicity, it is evident that what we describe below was informed by the police
service's desire to manage reputational risks. [26]

We first mailed a FOI request to the required address of the police service along
with the required payment using a postal money order. We requested: "all logs of
paid duty assignments for 2010-2011 inclusive." We indicated that we were not
seeking information about which officers took up pay duty assignments, only
whom the users of these services were, assignment duration, time of day, and
date from which a typology of users could be discerned through analysis. From
the three other police services we received acknowledgment of similar requests
by mail within the required 30 days (often agencies acknowledge and request
additional time to prepare records, which is permissible). We waited several
months but received no acknowledgment of our request or any other information.
We had not paid extra to track the envelope or whether the money order was
cashed. To receive a formal receipt for the FOI request the first author traveled to
this police service's headquarters in person (several hours round trip) in part to
resubmit the FOI request, pay the fee to a cashier in the headquarters' lobby, and
receive the formal receipt. We then waited several months and after not receiving
acknowledgment of this second request we appealed to the Information and
Privacy Commissioner of Ontario (IPC) that oversees FOI requests in the
province. In the appeal we indicated we had received the same or similar
information from other police services and the low cost of doing so (between
CDN$0-120). We were later instructed by the IPC representative who then
contacted the police service on our behalf that this police agency now
acknowledged receipt of one of the two requests and that their response was
forthcoming. They had not acknowledged either request until after we appealed
to the IPC. The police then responded in a formal letter that estimated the costs
to provide the information. The estimate was for CDN$2071, many times greater
than for similar information from other police services. This was a further stall.
The police service was now acknowledging the request and the existence of the
information, but the cost of acquiring it was prohibitive. We then contacted the
IPC about this stall. They explained that we could request that the police service
waive this fee according to the legislation if certain criteria were met. Five months
after the initial request to the police we sent another letter with a copy to the IPC,
which read:

> "I am requesting the fees for the about Freedom of Information request be waived consistent with subsection 45(4) of the MFIPPA for two reasons:
>
> 4(a) The actual cost of processing, collecting and copying the record is much less than the amount of payment required. Other police services, including those nearly as large, have provided exactly the same information at a small fraction of the cost that your office at the [police service] has quoted.
>
> 4(c) The information is being used for non-profit research purposes, the results of which will benefit public safety ... ." [27]

Two and a half months later we learned this police service had denied this request in a letter. The agency's rationale was that each police service "is a different entity and is not required to keep the same database format." Interestingly their letter also indicated: "Please note, your request dated May 17, 2012 and assigned our file number 12-2015 ... duplicates 666 pages of this request. You may wish to amend your request and ... and reduce your fees by $799.20." This meant the police service for the first time acknowledged they had received both our initial requests and not only one. Because of this refusal, the next step was to mediate through the IPC. During mediation over FOI requests a public agency is supposed to show the IPC mediator give and take, but the fact we had made two requests (i.e., the second "duplicating" the first) rather than one (only necessary because the police agency had ignored the first) was now being used to show movement in their stance on making the information available. The police service used our second request for the same information (a direct result of their refusal to acknowledge our first request) to justify the initial high cost they quoted, and to also show some flexibility. However, this move was not enough to bring the costs (still almost CDN$1300) in line with costs associated with information released by other police services. Through 21 e-mail exchanges with the IPC mediator, we decided to reduce our request to only three months of information to reduce the projected cost. We were able to do this at this point only because the agency had acknowledged receipt of the request and that the records existed. Two months later we received an IPC mediator's e-mail indicating the police service had agreed to provide these records by the next month for CDN$290. However, after making payment with a postal money order, this time tracked to ensure it was received, we still had not received the requested information. For this reason we contacted the arbitrator again, this time via four more e-mails almost a full year after we had made the first initial FOI request. The file had been transferred to a new IPC representative, to whom the first author sent the following:

> "I want to proceed with another appeal since I have paid $290 to [police service] but never received the agreed upon information ... It was supposed to be received by mid-March, according to ... the previous mediator. It is now the end of April. The second half of the payment via a money order has been cashed after April 6th. I have to account … for the $290. I also would like to know how much longer you expect I will have to wait to receive the information ..., whether I can expect to receive it any time in the future, and why the privacy commission is not enforcing ... regulations in this instance." [28]

The IPC representative responded by indicating they would commence a "failure to disclose" appeal. No time frame or other information was indicated. The next week we finally received the requested information from the police service by mail. [29]

4. Discussion: Strategies to Advance Qualitative Policing and Security Research

Facing these pitfalls can be frustrating, especially when it is known that a spin, stall, or shutdown is imminent. Challenges and barriers are part of the ups and downs of qualitative research (see BLODGETT et al., 2005; GUETTERMAN, 2015; MALACHOWSKI, 2015; McCOSKER et al., 2001), which can make the process tedious and emotionally draining (BLEE, 1998). To add to literature on criteria for quality in qualitative research (LINCOLN, 1995; SEALE, 1999; TRACEY, 2010), we now elaborate several strategies for qualitative researchers to seek to overcome the pitfalls derived from our experiences described above. TRACEY (2010) notes that the credibility, coherence, significance, and resonance of quality research will only be enhanced if researchers are honest about the challenges and failures they encounter. Although our experiences were with policing/security research, we believe some strategies are useful for qualitative researchers generally, especially strategies to study departments of larger organizations (e.g., universities, governments) (also see PENDERS et al., 2009; STEGMAIER, 2015). Our account is reflexive (FINLAY, 2002) to the extent it evaluates the research process, enables public scrutiny of our research, and provides an introspective look at mutual collaboration. [30]

One strategy to avoid these pitfalls, which we used, is to engage with multiple agencies simultaneously. This is especially important when a spin, stall, or shutdown jeopardizes the inquiry with one agency in particular. Depending on a researcher's resources (e.g., time, funding) this may require approaching numerous agencies at the outset. It also may demand being prepared to either engage all that agree to participate, to withdraw a request once approved, or to approach and engage alternative research sites should research pitfalls be encountered. To be sure, this extra step helps prevent all three pitfalls and enhances research credibility. When there are shutdowns research may continue unabated with other agencies. In our experience, though troubling and sometimes inexplicable, at no time did shutdowns threaten an entire research project. At first we incorporated this step into our research design more on a hunch or as a pragmatic response to encountering a pitfall. We now advocate designing this step into qualitative research to ensure if one information stream dries up others continue to flow. [31]

However, this strategy is dependent upon the selection (or sampling) of agencies of interest. In particular, the feasibility of this strategy requires there be enough such agencies at a study's outset. This was the case for us since local public police organizations, corporate security units in government, and campus security services were relatively plentiful; there were many from which to invite to participate and still permit the pursuit of our research questions. But the

population from which to sample would not necessarily be as large for all policing and security agency research (or similar research with few such organizations from which to select). If one's qualitative research was focused on *federal* public police organizations, this would be a different situation since there are relatively few. Thus, in the United States and Canada the population of such agencies is largely limited to one each: the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police respectively. In this case, this strategy would not be available to overcome the three kinds of pitfalls. [32]

The second strategy is to design research projects that draw upon multiple qualitative methods. This again mitigates any spins, stalls, or shutdowns that an agency might use against any particular method, and enhances credibility and significance. Though we accessed many agencies in our three projects, several simply denied access or prevented the use of one method (i.e., interviews, document collection). However, alternative methods (e.g., ATI/FOI requests) allowed for continued data collection. We discovered there is often little communication between the recipients of the different methods. Thus, ATI/FOI staff do not necessarily communicate with field agents and sometimes the information gathered and made available for a disclosure has not necessarily involved alerting the key manager whom might be interviewed later. However, researchers should use caution—if the key manager or others become aware of the ATI/FOI request this could damage rapport or encourage spin, stalls, or even a shutdown. Further, for ATI/FOI requests it makes sense to simultaneously access different sites whenever possible, even if it means reminding some personnel of the requirements (or existence) of freedom of information legislation. Since disclosures can be wildly variable, from what seems like a full disclosure (though one can never know for certain), to a few pages of information, and everything in between, it is possible to piece together the existence of similar documents in other agencies. Thus, one can identify patterns and logics of the agencies' selection for release documents that can also be informative (if, for example, some agencies do not release information currently politically contentious locally, whereas others where there is not this public controversy readily make similar documents available). This reduces the likelihood of a shutdown across agencies because they may not have enough lead-time. This also involves, where necessary during stalls, strategically revealing that FOI/ATI requests with similar agencies yielded all or most of the requested information, effectively shaming an agency for not complying with legislative requirements or peer practices. Merely because a police agency dismissed this strategy in one instance discussed above does not mean it was ineffective. Rather, because the agency was compelled to respond to it and some information was obtained through IPC mediation suggests it may have worked. As well, research design should include data production strategies that may seem only tangentially related to primary research questions at the outset in anticipation of shutdowns and stalls as pitfalls. And researchers should use appeals to access granted or information produced at other sites as one strategy to encourage agencies to disclose more information. [33]

The use of multiple qualitative methods also permits researchers to recognize spin in particular agencies. This proved successful, for example, for campus security services as discussed above. A related third strategy is to include participants from outside the agency who are networked with that agency. For instance, for municipal corporate security contexts, private security personnel, sometimes contracted to perform guard duties, were interviewed. This strategy can allow researchers to gain outsiders' perspectives on an agency's practices where the compulsion to change the meaning of the agency's practices is absent or, since they might also be concerned with the network's reputation, at least is less likely. By incorporating multiple methods and inclusion of outsiders' perspectives, researchers can mitigate the effects of spins through triangulation. [34]

A fourth strategy concerns preventing stalls in negotiating access and disclosure. The formal representative (for example, a municipal government, university, or public police media relations representative) of the larger organization, if there is one, has more resources and often experience and should be avoided as the first contact if possible. This is because there is no way to gauge the autonomy of any given policing/security representative or unit (or other department within a larger organization) beforehand, and nothing is necessarily gained by entering an agency at much higher levels. Going to the top is neither always advantageous for research nor necessarily safeguards individual research participants. When ethics boards blithely make such recommendations this may simply be an element of what HAGGERTY (2004) calls "ethics creep." By this term he means the increasing governance of social science research using risk categories (that in policing/security research all too easily dovetail with risk categories that policing/security agencies themselves use) (also see BURR & REYNOLDS, 2012; LIBRETT & PERRONE, 2010; PRIOR, 2010). One strategy is to contact department representatives or middle managers whenever possible and let them decide whether they need approval (while strictly adhering to ethics requirements—which may require working with one's ethics board to ensure access need not be brokered through organizational leaders). At times when negotiating access with these agencies critical researchers may wish too, for example, to ensure their discourse is middle-of-the-road, especially on the telephone during recruitment. This is not deception since ethics protocols are followed. Rather, this is an anti-confessional approach to negotiating entry to field sites, what we referred to above as researcher image self-management. Such researcher image self-management was also undertaken during fieldwork to avoid potential spins or shutdowns. For example, the third author would often reference his family members' background in emergency medical services. This was intended to relay an understanding or familiarity with aspects of policing/security culture that are shared with other emergency first responders (e.g., gallows humor). Such management is no more deceptive than the everyday construction of our selves; not everything in our past, current, and future back stages can be revealed by pulling open a metaphorical curtain during initial interactions with strangers on the telephone or in personal encounters (GOFFMAN, 1959). Our main point here, however, is that given the secrecy of policing/security services (ADLER & ADLER, 2002) and other organizations studied by qualitative researchers

(PENDERS et al., 2009; SCHEPPELE, 1988; STEGMAIER, 2015), it is best to follow the paths that are least likely to foment stall and spin. [35]

This article has identified three types of pitfalls in qualitative research in policing and security agencies that we have labeled spins, stalls, and shutdowns. We have illustrated these pitfalls in three different research contexts in English Canada. We believe these contexts have a wider relevance not only for policing/security agencies that are deserving of special reflection due to their use of security to keep practices secret and because of their power in relation to the citizenry but also other public organizations difficult to access. We then proposed strategies to overcome such barriers in this specific area of qualitative inquiry and in other research that targets other, especially public, organizations. We contend these strategies are important for researchers to consider for future research since, despite tremendous growth in the scope and power of policing/security agencies, there has not been a concomitant growth of *qualitative* research that explores their inner workings to the extent possible. Such research would identify and seek to understand agency practices and their internal and external effects in ways that quantitative and similar kinds of research on their own are less equipped to accomplish. [36]

One parting point about gaining access to policing/security agencies under study is important to note. The extent to which access is denied is the extent to which there is cause for concern about what policing/security agencies are doing to populations they watch and control (EARL, 2009). The stakes are high, which raises questions about whether more wit in negotiating access and greater use of investigative research tactics are warranted given the potential for unwarranted secrecy by public policing/security agencies. Moreover, we think such approaches are justifiable when "studying up," that is when studying powerful government agencies and other entities such as private corporations. These are situational decisions each researcher has to make, weighing ethics on the books against relational ethics (GUILLEMIN & GILLAM, 2004) and the growing need to illuminate policing and security practices that are potentially undemocratic, wasteful of precious public resources, drastically reducing life chances via criminalization or exclusion of disadvantaged individuals and groups, and sometimes even unlawful. When our research illuminates these overlooked agencies or the heretofore purposely darkened spaces of their practices it may represent one of only a few remaining means to satisfy this need and serve the broader public good. The tactics required and the fact that, as outsiders, we gained access and in some instances were welcomed by these agencies, matters for advancing the significance and resonance of qualitative research (TRACEY, 2010) and serves as a measure of the transparency and accountability of increasingly influential and powerful policing/security agencies. [37]

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