Infiltration: an emerging grounded theory explanation of penetrating and sustaining a presence within the inner circles of others

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Abstract

This is a grounded theory of the basic social process of infiltration. Novice researchers, infants, foreigners and new recruits all face conceptually similar problems of being able to successfully infiltrate into an array of alien situations. The grounded theory emerged from data from the context of a novice researcher gaining and sustaining access for research. Infiltration has three sub-core variables: credentializing, cultivating and experientializing. These sub-core variables are applicable across a wide range status passage situations. The indicators, categories and properties of the emergent variables are explained in detail. The paper follows the orthodox tenets of grounded theory and as such deals with the literature review as a means of comparison subsequent to the emergence of the basic social process of infiltration.

This paper evolved out of the interaction between an experienced and novice grounded theory researcher during the course of gaining access into veterinary practices in Scotland. The more experienced grounded theory researcher encouraged the novice to systematically document all aspects of the research experience and not just those that were relevant to the substantive area of doctoral research being pursued. The result has been the discovery of an emergent theory of infiltration.

As we write this paper the novice researcher is approaching the end of the first year of a full time PhD program and the experienced researcher has a decade of grounded theory experience.

The aim of this paper is to use Grounded Theory Research Methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to develop a theoretical explanation of how a novice researcher becomes competent by the basic social process of infiltration. The problems associated with moving from a state of ignorance to becoming sufficiently knowledgeable we consider to be an example of a status passage transformation. The novice researcher is not alone in having to deal with unfamiliar challenges associated with penetrating the inner circles of others. Infants, foreigners, new recruits, amongst others; face similar dilemmas in varied settings. They must all somehow discover whatever is required to progress in their particular situation from the standpoint of a novice.

By focusing on this transitional passage, the research is endeavouring to:

- increase the awareness and understanding of the processes which have been experienced,

- demonstrate that it is legitimate for a 'novice' to contribute to existing theory, and,

- enable novice researchers to process their transitions more effectively.

As this paper is being written the novice researcher is approaching the end of her first year of a full time PhD program. Data obtained through my her recent experiences as a virgin Grounded Theory researcher have been used in exploring this universally relevant problem. The impetus for this paper springs from the standpoint of being a participant observer interested in discovering the main issues of concern in veterinary practice. The paper is co-authored in recognition of the beneficial supervision the novice researcher has been re-

ceiving from her experienced grounded theory supervisor. The framework which emerges is

therefore truly grounded. By this it is meant that any constructs are generated from the reality

of her own experiences. They

are not contrived or contaminated by loyalty to 'accepted wisdom' or the 'thoughts' idolised by

theoretical capitalists.·

Any flimsiness in the texture of the theory put forward is merely a reflection of the emergent

understanding of the data; density on the other hand would suggest movement toward com-

petency. As a consequence of the use of Grounded Theory methodology, the validity of the

emergent theory should be judged ultimately according to its fit, relevance, work and modi-

fiability.

This means the theory should be true to the data, explain the processing of the main

concern of those being studied, be of practical use to others in similar situations; and be read-

ily modifiable in its ability to deal with and integrate new cases.

The basic social process of infiltration

The emergent theory of infiltration which is revealed is both simple and complex. Its simplic-

ity lies in its discovery and the emergence of its three sub-core variables:

- Credentializing (sub-core variable)

- Cultivating (sub-core variable)

- Experientializing (sub-core variable).

The interrelationships between these processes are complex. They have multi-dimensional

relationships with each other. It is not possible to demonstrate in a single static diagram

where credentializing or cultivating gives way to experientializing and so on. The processes

are not linear, they intertwine. Figure 1. is designed to illustrate both the interconnectedness

and motion which are fundamental to the infiltration process which the novice researcher has

been experienced. Removal of the core variable of infiltration leads to conceptual disintegra-

tion - the theory fails to 'account for change' in relation to dispossessing one's novice status.

Infiltrating

The sub-core variable of Credentializing.

Credentializing has emerged as one of the main sub-core variables of this study. It has

been systematically generated from the data through the use of orthodox Grounded Theory

methodology (1978). Credentializing explains how a novice researcher endeavours to disa-

vow the beginners status in favour of developing competence. Credentials are gauges of
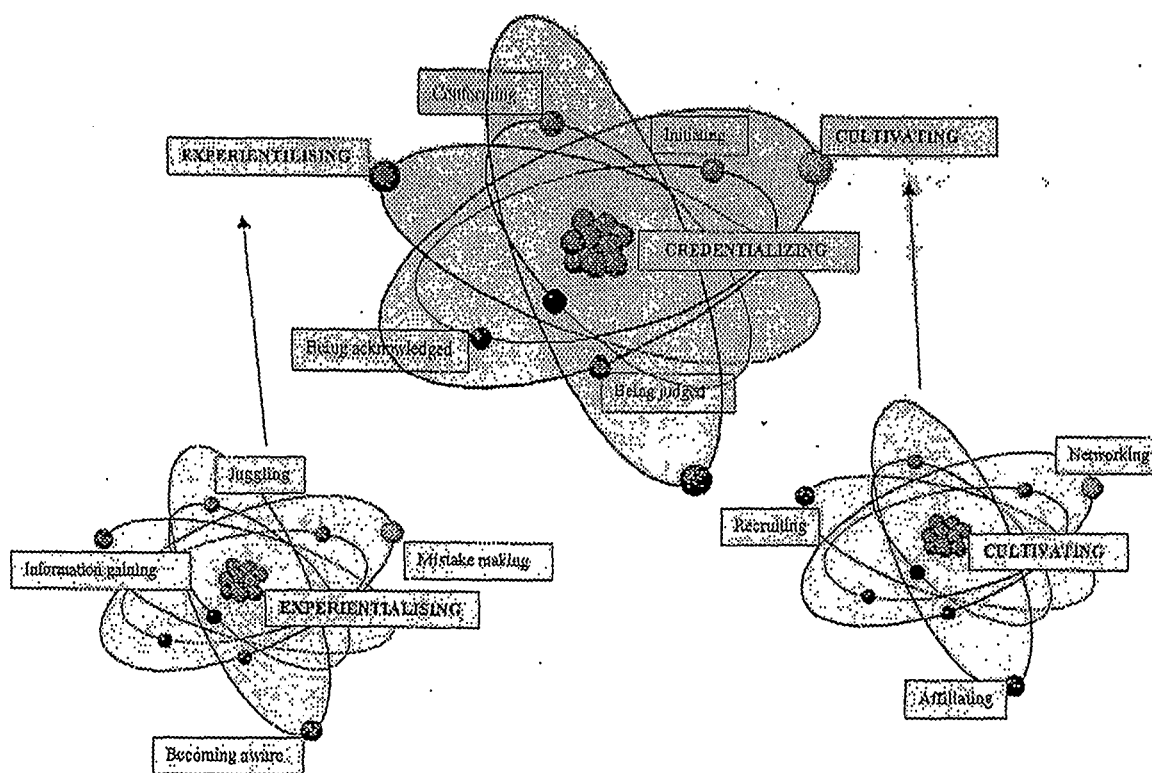

Figure 1: Infiltrating

fundamental significance. Credentializing establishes the legitimacy associated with gaining a

license to practice. Self-confidence is a by-product of credentializing. Similarly, credentializ-

ing generates confidence in others as to the individual's abilities. The overall effect is of stabilisation through integration.

The process of credentializing is complemented by two other sub-core variables. These are 'cultivating' and 'experientializing'. As a novice it is necessary to cultivate relationships in order to manoeuvre into a favourable position to discover, through experience (trail and error) what skills are required in order to be judged competent.

The categories of credentializing which have emerged in this instance are: 'conforming', 'being judged', 'initiating' and 'being recognized as competent'.

Conforming. This encompasses the novices' attempts to gain acceptability to the group or position aspired to. Credentializing depends upon appropriate positioning on a number of dimensions. These dimensions vary according to the specific situation and the subtleties of the codes of behaviour which apply. A property of conforming is copying. In light of prior discovery, having lived the experience, the 'novice' understands the rules of the game. An in depth knowledge of how behaviour will require to be modified makes it possible to align actions accordingly. Matching the expectations of the legitimating authority is paramount. Endeavouring to attain acceptable orientation prepares the novice for being judged.

Being judged. A property of this category is monitoring. The judgement procedure may involve simple observation of the candidate. Equally, complex scrutinization and proving rituals may be in operation. Paper qualifications may be insufficient to guarantee recognition. Technically making the grade is only one dimension, further attributes may be sought. The newcomer may well be expected to undergo an apprentice- ship. After dues have been paid by being subjugated to menial tasks, superiors may permit an increase in privileges as deemed appropriate. Judging and initiating are manifestations of control strategies designed

to protect the status quo. Another property of judging is pacing. This too serves to protect existing group members from dilution or contamination from unfit novices. It would be unusual for full membership rites to be granted swiftly, without a probationary period. Newcomers to the setting are gradually granted full membership rites. Initially the novice researcher was introduced to the vernacular over coffee and chat. Then became privy to gossip and 'invokes' (usually concerning quirky clients). Latterly, the novice researcher was trusted to answer the phone and deal directly with clients. The realisation that a transformation had occurred was something which the researcher only became aware of retrospectively. It would be unusual for full membership rites to be granted swiftly, without a probationary period.

Initiating. When visiting the setting for the first time the novice researcher was conscious of being placed under surveillance. She was scrutinized intensely on first attending the operating theatre. the novice researcher subsequently identified this as an initiation ceremony. It is explained through the concept of flooding', an idea borrowed from the context of blood sports and war. Existing group members bear witness to some sort of trail, which they themselves previously experienced. The process has several stages. The candidate is prepared for the ritual to come, the spilling of blood, followed by assessment of suitability and the actual smearing process whereby the novice is judged worthy of membership.

Being acknowledged. Gaining one's credentials or being accepted symbolises that one is no longer seen as an outsider. In living through this credentializing process, and experiencing confidencing, a property of being recognised, the novice begins to supplant the learner's status. Credentializing is therefore not an end result, it is, in many ways, a beginning.

<center>**The sub-core variable of Cultivating.**</center>

The cultivation of people constitutes the novice's initial concern. How should support be established in order to facilitate the discovery of the required skills needed to become competent? Most commonly, it involves strategizing with the aim of generating an anticipated result. It seems to be innate to some degree. The novice researcher engaged in different forms of cultivating in the early stages of my research without any apparent calculated intent or explicit awareness.

Networking is a sub-process of cultivating. It involves establishing, maintaining and developing a web of relationships. Four categories of networking have been dis- covered. Speculative networking - means an instinctive type of networking and would be considered by on-lookers as completely irrational as there appears no logical reason to select individuals randomly on the off-chance that there will be some unforeseen benefit. Exploitative networking entails the fostering of contacts with whom one intends to leave at a distinct disadvantage. Enduring networking is that based on mutual benefit for all those involved. Retrospective networking may be practised where initially one failed to realise the benefits of nurturing certain contacts. Networks may also be local or cosmopolitan. For example, through her supervisor the novice researcher had contacts with fellow grounded theory researchers, 'close up', within her department at university, whilst she also networked with others, 'distant' in terms of location and specialism.

The appropriate development of networks has a very tangible effect throughout the process of transition. In the early stages they have an especially supportive role. Equally they may well have a delayed action effect ie. developing contacts with experts in one's substantive area may only yield their rewards much further down the path. For example the researcher had been building contacts with an individual who she knew to be skilled in orches-

trating focus groups (an area which she had minimal knowledge of) it is possible that towards the final stages of her research she will want to run a focus group.

Recruiting. Another sub-process of relevance in the cultivating context is recruiting. Primarily recruiting takes place in initial stages and sporadically thereafter, as required. It was necessary for the researcher to recruit what might be called 'useful others' at the outset. There was a need for a supervisor to act as a mentor and a sponsor to assist with financing. The requirement for cultivating is apparent here. The researcher first had to identify potential 'recruits', make contact, interact and demonstrate my suitability by way of past achievements, current activities and emphasis on future potential.

The recruitment process involves wooing. It may involve beautifying, a property of soliciting, adorning of the individual in a bid to tempt. This may necessitate the use of artificial means. This means that one party may feel there is legitimate cause or the stakes are of sufficient magnitude to warrant some form of benign deceit. The overall offering must be judged sufficiently attractive for the recruitment to go ahead. Negotiations as to the remuneration package may be protracted.

In cultivating processes the balance of power is not evenly distributed and this has significance for the evolution of strategies which are primarily deigned to compensate for the asymmetry. This does not preclude the dominant force from seeking out an association with the novice. Recruitment processes are here shown to be reversible. The expert may indeed engage in allurement tactics if a particular association is judged to be particularly desirable. An already highly regarded supervisor may choose a particularly gifted student to collaborate with, craving a share in the rising star's adulation by way of association. The more powerful

player may inspire awe in the eyes of the inexperienced. This awing may serve as the initial

bait to ensnare the innocent, similarly it may be used as a method of control.

Affiliating. The final process which became subsumed under the BSP (Basic Social Process)

of cultivating is entitled affiliating. This involves strategies designed to enable an outsider to

begin the often difficult task of being accepted. Affiliating removes the threat to those in any

social situation. It has the potential to open up a previously unseen world. What would nor-

mally be blurred and out-with the reach of the lens comes into focus. The process of affilia-

tion paves the way for the researcher to experientialize the reality of the social world to be

studied. Without engaging in affiliative behaviour in the context of becoming a competent

Grounded Theorist. The researcher may simply witness a mirage. The researcher is in danger

of being duped by potentially clandestine agendas of vested interests. In which case the re-

sultant theory would be invalid. Affiliating is fundamental in its ability to reveal the truth as

distinct from fiction. Affiliation essentially means getting 'close to' a subject. This was

achieved at a substantive level, in my experience, by adopting the role of participant observer

in the veterinary practice setting. However affiliation should not be judged as being success-

ful on account of merely being present in a setting. Only once the subtleties of the social set-

ting begin to reveal themselves would it be safe to say that cultivation via affiliating was

reaping its reward. The researcher recognises when this begins to occur. It becomes possible

to predict with confidence and reliability what will happen next.

The tactics which were employed whilst in the field, which the researcher termed af-

filiative were aimed at developing and demonstrating trust. At first the researcher concen-

trated on fitting in. This means making the researcher appear as if she belonged in the setting.

The researcher engaged in helping. This involved making a special effort to convey my ea-

gerness to make herself useful. This was not difficult in the frenetic atmosphere of the veterinary surgery. The searcher ensured that she participated fully, working until late at night if that was going on. She was especially careful to willingly attend to the less pleasant aspects of the work. In doing this the researcher gained the respect of the vet nurses. Winning their confidence was essential, because, as the researcher was to discover, gossiping with the nurses over coffee proved to be an excellent source of data. In addition she made sure that if the opportunity arose to do favours ie. run errands, transport animals in her car etc. Every effort to volunteer her assistance was made. Another category of the afffiliating process of significance was friending. The researcher cultivated friendly associations with all those in the setting without discriminating by rank. She was cautious during this phase not to force the pace, so she was subconsciously engaging in pacing in order not to appear too pushy and risk alienation as opposed to incorporation.

Affiliating is therefore fundamental in positioning the novice in order that knowledge and skills necessary to make the transition can be acquired. In essence the novice must cultivate people in order to cultivate skills. It appears that the cultivation process outlined serves to admit the novice to a springboard from which the process of experientializing can begin.

The sub-core variable of Experientializing.

This process involves learning the ropes by actually experiencing life as a novice. It means discovering the subtleties of the social situation of interest by trial and error. By actually experiencing the process one gradually gives it meaning. Only by living the reality of becoming a Grounded Theory researcher was the researcher able to make sense of the data by having reflective conversations both with the data, in the form of theoretical memos and with my supervisor in a series of discussions. Gradually by reflecting on these experiences the re-

searcher discovered that she can now articulate the meaning of the data from the perspective of those being studied. Having developed the necessary skills, it is now possible begin to understand the some of the subtleties that only going through the process could engender.

Information gaining is a category of experientializing. By seeking out information at first hand by watching, listening, recording, then comparing, the researcher discovers the specific language and values sacred to the setting under study. With this expanding understanding of the rules and values underpinning the social world being studied is a growing awareness of the appropriate strategy for discovering what may still remain hidden.

For example in the early stages of the research process, it was judged it appropriate to adopt the role of 'know-nothing' novice. This was for a specific purpose - namely so that she would not appear threatening in any way and also to ensure that any preconceived notions of hers should not be imposed on the research. By acting completely uninformed the researcher encouraged the respondents to unburden what was really on their minds. This enabled agenda-setting to be governed by the prime concerns of those of interest. At a later stage however it may no longer be appropriate to continue in the role of blissful ignorance. The partially deceitful tactic of appearing informed but requiring correction may be indicated. Role-tailoring is a property of information gaining.

A highly significant property of information gaining is revealing rituals. This involves intimate contact and knowledge of the social setting of significance. By observing, documenting and ultimately being capable of explaining what to outsiders would appear as a mysterious ritual could be judged a good indicator of the transition toward competency in developing the sensitivity required of an effective Grounded Theorist.

Mistake making is important to the experientialzing process for the novice. This links to the awareness category. By learning through doing, mistakes are inevitable. By making errors, the researcher is sensitized to the consequences. If they are sufficiently serious it is likely they will be avoided in future. For example in the early stages the researcher avoided engaging in memoing procedures which are fundamental to the Grounded Theory methodology. Becoming aware of mistake making and taking appropriate action to reorient increases through experientialzing.

Avoiding is a coping strategy which emerged through examining the concept of mistake making. It was realised that when one is in the rank of novice, unfamiliar problems can appear insurmountable. As a way of dealing with this the researcher recognised that she was ignoring the difficulty instead of confronting it. For example the novice researcher found herself accumulating lots of interesting data and failing to force herself to code and compare as is necessary in Grounded Theory research.

Becoming aware. The category denoted 'becoming aware' relates intimately to the experientializing process and overall in trying to account for change in the novice. This category would hold less weight if it was being related to a structurally robust status passage. Where as the phases one must pass through in the service of becoming a Grounded Theory researcher are variable and unclear, awareness is significant.

Becoming aware is a function of the experientializing process. It enables the competent researcher to engage in the practice of leap-froging. The researcher simply bypasses unnecessary stages in the process, electing not to be derailed from what Will now be a visible path. In contrast, the naive beginner risks being deflected from the transitional passage through lack of awareness and consequently minimal control.

Awareness not only of the nature of the transitions, but also of the existence of other interrelated status passages is another property emergent from learning by doing. Conflicting passages may hijack the transition to competent researcher. Complimentary passages may enhance the process.

Juggling is the final category of the experientializing process. Learning juggling is an ability to 'work' several things concurrently. It is another coping skill and one approach to dealing with variable demands on time and energy.

Having explained the emergent theory of infiltrating, we now provide a brief justification for this work and then compare it to relevant literature. To conclude, we detail what we consider to be the main contributions of this research.

Justification for the research.

Fagerhaugh (1986), states that "The ultimate goal of analysing qualitative data for process is to account for change over time". He continues, "Process analysis is also the most difficult level of analysis for the novice researcher handling qualitative data because it involves ordering and linking the hundreds of bits of loosely formulated categories into a logical whole". These observations encapsulate the challenge of this paper.

Early work concerning the rites of passage, attributable to van Gennep (1908), focuses predominantly on age and sex linked passages. He focuses, in fascinating detail, on the movement from birth to childhood, through adolescence, marriage to motherhood, to death and possible rebirth. Whilst professing a desire to discover not just the forms of rites of passage but their meanings, he concentrates exclusively on the former. There is a marked neglect of raising the analysis beyond description to a more conceptual level.

Van Gennep's (1908) main contribution is in highlighting the persuasiveness of status change. However, the impression given is that status passages are prescriptive in nature and linear in outline. His emphasis on 'rectilinear' diagramming suggests and overly simplistic view. Our combined experiences in contrast emphasise the dynamism and multi-dimensional character of becoming a more competent researcher. The process of 'passing' indicates an arrival and in so doing implies there will be a departure. However it would appear there is nothing preordained or clearly defined about the transition from novice. Bearing this in mind there is a real need for exploration in conceptual terms.

Comparing this substantive theory to Glaser and Strauss' (1971) work on Status Passage.

Similarities and Differences.

A significant similarity is the concept of the existence of multiple status passages. The historic belief that status passages are purely scheduled and regularised is contested. The notion that as a novice one makes a smooth transition towards competency with time is appealing. The reality however, as was demonstrated in both Glaser and Strauss (l971) and our case, is more complex. For example, we have discovered that progression along the desired route is by no means inevitable. Regression can and does occur. What we refer to as 'blocking' (for example, due to acute illness or shortage of money) may temporarily obstruct forward momentum. Alternatively a new and exciting relationship might energise other transitions. More seriously, complete regression may mean progress is terminally blocked forcing abandonment of the specific passage. Glaser and Strauss (1971) explain the problems associated with the phenomenon of conflicting passages. They acknowledge the need to juggle with time and energy.

Glaser and Strauss (1971) outline and explore at least a dozen aspects, which they label properties, of status passage. Among these are desirability, inevitability, reversibility, repeatability, collectivity, awareness, degree of control, legitimation and clarity. Credentializing is not explicitly documented. It is therefore not possible to explore this comparison to any significant degree. Legitimating, which appears to correspond to credentializing, is alluded to in a minor way. This difference may simply reflect the specific sources of data from which the theory springs combined With a divergent use of terminology, not substance. There is an exploration of the fundamental problem of control, namely who is in control and who is vying for control over the passage. Glaser and Strauss' (1971) example of 'studentsmanship' seems to reflect the overall process explained by my substantive theory of credentializing. The student is faced with the problem of 'getting through' school. The challenge is not only to 'become' a professional, but to convince the faculty (representing the legitimating authority) that this was being accomplished. The converse example of a failure to credentialize is the student who feels comfortable maintaining student status and wishes to postpone the symbolic act of graduating (being recognised). A further indirect reference to the process of credentializing emerges through the education and training of a candidate towards self-sufficiency. This concept links to the category of being acknowledged and so to the properties of confidencing and becoming independent which were encountered.

Reversibility, the extent to which the direction of a passage may be controlled, would not be relevant in the case of a highly scheduled age linked passage. In the case of the novice dealing With the uncertainty of an unknown passage, the issue of how to influence progression is significant. The transition from novice toward competence is not assured. The question of how to balance the forces of progression versus regression are real. The development,

by way of experientializing, of awareness and subsequent control are mechanisms to deal with the uncertainty ahead. Progression is not automatic. Glaser and Strauss (1971) employ the term reversibility giving an example from within organisations where people not only move upward, they may also be demoted. The label directional control over status passage might prove more meaningful.

The most notable difference between the formal theory and our emergent theory discussed in this paper is that the basic social process of cultivating is not explored by Glaser and Strauss (1971). The process we label 'recruiting' is developed however, so too is its subordinate property of hooking. The concept of 'networking' is raised briefly, although not using the term. The example quoted involves the corporate executive trying to build an 'informal collegial system' to support himself. Instead if seeing this as a conscious act of cultivaton, the authors view it as a means of guarding against their idea of reversibility of status passage. Significantly there is no reference to 'affiliating' which figured prominently in my substantive theory.

Other differences are reflected in the numerically fewer categories emergent from my theory. This can be explained simply as a natural variation between formal and substantive theory generation.

Finally, another important similarity is evident. This relates closely to the process which we call experientializing. This partially emerges in the guise of what Glaser and Strauss (1971) call 'discovering a status passage'. They note that "there are many status passages of whose existence passages are unaware ... It is only revealed to the passage as he goes along". Information or knowledge of the passage is identified with control and equates to my category called 'information gaining'.

Related literature on the processes revealed by this research.

Credentializing. Simmons (1972) in his study exploring the processes involved in becoming a milkman explains the concept of credentializing, although he does not use the term. The novice milkman tries to over-perform in attempting to gain new business. By networking and using cultivating techniques he seeks to earn credit from his route supervisor who represents his legitimating authority. Maxwell (1993) in her paper on "fencing processes" focuses to a significant degree on a category which we label being judged. In this example 'model keepers' (the legitimators) place trainees under surveillance. They regulate or pace their progression strictly. This parallels the initiating category which we use in explaining credentializing. Maxwell also reflects another aspect of my work. *Copying* is implicated as a necessary component of all 'group identity displays'. This corresponds to my experiences in the veterinary practice setting whereby we initially conformed to codes of dress, adopted the 'veterinary vernacular' and as it was revealed to me, their code of behaviour.

Experientializing was also noted in the above mentioned works. The authors both identify information gaining as highly significant in this context. Simmons points to information gaining in order to detect potential new and worthwhile clients. He highlights the importance of 'trial and error' in the process of learning how to become a milkman. Maxwell emphasizes information gaining in discovering the subtleties of social situations and in understanding the identity displays, isolating strategies and hiding activities which may be relevant.

Cultivating of relationships is the core process of Simmons' work. He parallels what we call *networking*, explaining the essence of this as discovering 'good leads' via friends, neighbours and existing customers. The procedures for recruiting are outlined. Finally he ex-

plains my process of affiliating (though fails to adopt the term) - mirroring my strategies in the veterinary context. Trust inducing tactics including 'nurturing pseudofrtendship' and 'effecting obligation' are detailed. The cultivation of friendly relations is also documented in Glaser and Strauss (1973), Experts Versus Laymen. Their property of 'sweet talking' matches my property of friending. In this example

The subcontractor fosters amicable relations with the 'patsy' in order to gain trust and hopefully the contract to carry out the building work. This is another example of affiliative behaviour aimed at cultivating a beneficial outcome.

Conclusion.

The insights revealed, we believe, help to increase the understanding of status passage; specifically there are three issues to which this paper contributes.

Firstly, the method we have used to diagram the interrelated variables of the process of infiltration allows these essentially abstract ideas to become more understandable to a wider audience.

Secondly, our emergent substantive theory demonstrates the workability and modifiability of the original formal theory discovered by Glaser and Strauss (1971).

Finally, that grounded theory not only has direct relevance for future progress but also for its usefulness in sensitising other novice researchers before entering the field.

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