**Researching Drinking 'with' Young People: A Palette of Methods**


## Abstract

Purpose

This paper outlines a study characterised by 'pockets' of co-production and argues for the benefits of offering young people a palette of interdisciplinary methods to 'opt into', giving participants the opportunity to discuss their drinking practices and experiences 'on their own terms'.

Design/methodology/approach

40 young people, aged 15-24, from the suburban case study locations of Chorlton and Wythenshawe, Manchester, UK, were recruited for multi-stage qualitative research. Participants were presented with a suite of both long-standing and innovative methods that they could 'opt into', including: interviews, peer interviews, diaries, mobile phone interviews text messaging and participant observation.

Findings

This paper shows that both long-standing and innovative methods have their own individual strengths for researching into young people's alcohol consumption practices and experiences. Yet, each of the methods utilised in this study also had specific drawbacks for researching substance use. Offering a palette of methods for participants to 'opt into' was thus beneficial in: offsetting the weaknesses of other methods; triangulating the study findings; and enabling participants to communicate with the researcher in culturally credible ways.

Originality/value

By offering an honest account about the successes and failures of deploying a range of methods when exploring young people's drinking practices and experiences, this paper is valuable for researchers in, and beyond, the field of substance use, seeking to broaden their methodological toolkit.



**Key words:** Alcohol; Co-production; Drinking; Participatory Methods; Qualitative Research; Young People.

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## Introduction

This paper critically reflects on the experiences of conducting mixed-methods qualitative research *with* young people (aged 15-24), with the aim of exploring their alcohol consumption practices and experiences. We purposefully emphasise researching 'with' to demonstrate that research is a shared process of knowledge creation between all those participating in the research (Leyshon, 2002). It is worth noting from the off-set that this study was not an entirely co-produced one: the aims and objectives were set by the researcher; the analysis occurred in isolation from participants; and the writing up has not involved participants (see names removed for anonymity). What we are stating though, is that the project involved "pockets" of co-production (Franks, 2011:15). For instance, the first author offered a suite of methods for young people to 'opt into' (Leyshon, 2002), including interviews, peer interviews, diaries, mobile phone interviews, text messaging, and participant observation. Such methods enabled participants with a variety of different skills to participate in the research 'on their own terms' (Leyshon *et al*., 2013:180). We also contend that it is important that such methods are not deployed in a 'one size fits all' manner; instances are highlighted where the research design was refined and developed through listening to the experiences of young people in the study. The above methodological approach works with Bennett and Roberts' (2004) notion of participatory research as a methodological philosophy that reflects the desire of researchers to give more control to participants; it is a philosophy that aims to be interactive, as opposed to extractive.

Research about substance use and its place in the lives of young people has employed flexible approaches. For instance, MacLean (2015) offered both individual and friendship group interviews in a study of young adults' (18-24) drinking in Australia. Further, Jarvinen and Ravn (2011) offered participants the chance to take part in a focus group, either with a group of friends, or with other drug-experienced clubbers. If uncomfortable participating, they were invited to participate in an interview either alone or with a friend. Moreover, Seaman and Ikegwuonu (2011) investigated the role of alcohol within the transitions to adulthood of 18-25 year olds living in Glasgow, UK using both interviews and a drink diary. Nonetheless, such studies often rely on a narrow range of long-standing methods; they do not offer a diverse palette of long-standing and innovative methods which reflect the varying skills and abilities

of young people. Moreover, such publications on substance use typically present the research process as a seamless act of formulating aims, collecting and analysing data, and presenting findings. This makes it difficult for early career researchers to gain a true insight into the challenges of deploying specific methods. In this paper, we go some way towards filling this void by foregrounding the successes and complexities of using a variety of qualitative methods as a means of researching young people's drinking practices.

**Participatory Research with Young People**

Since the 1990s, research with children and young people has witnessed significant changes in methods and epistemologies that have challenged long-standing research methods (Weller, 2006), and have endeavoured to dismantle conceptions of children as mindless and deviant (see Pain 2003). The literature has witnessed a surge in children-centred and, less so, young people-centred research methods. Such methods endeavour to remedy power inequities by supporting young people to choose their own methods of communication (Weller 2006). This is in line with the emphasis within social sciences upon young people's agency (e.g. Holloway and Valentine 2000). Alongside this movement, participatory research has gained increasing popularity (Wright *et al*. 2006) and can be seen as an effective, and more inclusive, way of engaging hard-to-research populations in the research process.

Whereas children and young people were previously considered passive, or at best marginal, in research encounters, participatory research positions them as co-creators of knowledge. Often methods are employed to draw on skills possessed by the age group. For instance, older children may be involved in methods such as completing diaries and story-writing, whilst younger children may be invited to participate in drawing activities. Accommodating different skill sets is important as young people are a highly differentiated group, and approaches that are appropriate for children may be unsuitable or unacceptable for teenagers, and vice versa.

As Pinter and Zandian (2015) point out, creative participatory methods can provide heightened opportunities for enjoyment, education and a sense of empowerment. Importantly, however, though potentially enjoyable, adopting creative participatory methods does not guarantee that young people have genuine opportunities to develop and perform agency throughout a research project (Waller and Bitou 2011). To explain, the success of the implementation of these methods is, in part, related to the positionality of the adult researcher. There are arguments that researchers should adopt the 'least adult' role (see Randall 2012), and debunk children's

impressions of the powerful and "potentially dangerous" researcher (see Phelan and Kinsella 2013:85).

However, Ansell (2001) cautions that equal research relationships are impossible. The joint production/co-construction of research is complex as young people often do not possess the same level of data collection and analysis skills as researchers, who may have spent several years at university honing their skills. Enabling young people to develop the knowledge, skills and responsibility to co-construct research signals the "conscious exchange of power" (McCartan *et al*. 2012:10) between adult researchers and young people. Participatory research, then, increases young people's capacity to identify and solve problems affecting them. However, this is not without critique, and some authors 107 have condemned such 'teaching' as implying that participants would benefit from "superior" knowledge (see Ansell, 2001:103). Others instead argue that participatory research is a process of mutual learning (Ho 2013); whilst young people may be trained as peer researchers, developing skills in interviewing and facilitating focus groups (see e.g. Cahill 2007), researchers become co-learners in their everyday lifeworlds (Minkler *et al*. 2002).

**Methodology**

The research was conducted in the suburban case study locations of Chorlton and Wythenshawe, Manchester, UK. Suburban locations were selected due to a pre-occupation in the substance use literature with cities, typified by a large body of work on the night-time economy (Holloway *et al*., 2008). Chorlton and Wythenshawe were chosen, in particular, due to the differences in ethnic diversity, socio-economic status, educational attainments, and drinking micro-geographies between the areas; this makes for a useful comparative analysis.

The first author recruited 40 young people, aged 15-24, for multi-stage qualitative research over the course of 12 months (September 2013-September 2014). The first author aimed for a relatively equal distribution of participants between both suburban case study locations, resulting in 19 young people talking part from Wythenshawe, and 21 young people taking part from Chorlton. Further, slightly more young women ended up taking part in the study (eight young men, and 11 young women in Wythenshawe, and eight young men and 13 young women from Chorlton).

In order to recruit participants, the first author contacted gatekeepers at local universities, secondary schools, sixth forms, colleges, community organisations, libraries, leisure centres, and youth clubs, in, and in close proximity to, the case study locations. She also distributed flyers and business cards to houses and businesses in both case study locations; posted on online discussion forums concerning Chorlton and Wythenshawe; used Twitter to recruit; and posted on Facebook groups about the two areas. Further, the first author arranged to be interviewed by the morning host of a local community radio station, Wythenshawe FM 97.2, in order to broaden her recruitment strategies. As this paper now turns to explore, the research was conducted utilising a "palette of interdisciplinary methods" (Mason, 2006:13).

## Towards A 'Palette' of Methods

The palette of methods (Mason, 2006) that the first author presented for participants to 'opt into' consisted of: interviews, peer interviews, diaries, mobile phone interviews, text messaging, and participant observation. Each of these methods was not dependent on a minimum sample size, nor an equal sample size across the case study locations (Leyshon *et al*., 2013). Participants opted into the methods they perceived to be the most enjoyable and felt the most comfortable with - they were by no means obliged to participate in all of the methods, although they were more than welcome to do so. This was a research strategy successfully deployed by Leyshon (2002) in his research with young people in the countryside. As Holland *et al*. (2008:19, emphasis in original) argue, "by enabling young people to choose *how* they wish to communicate with us we recognise them as social actors and begin to move our practice away from adult-centric procedures". As the below demonstrates, we are committed to an attitude of "methodological immaturity" (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008), which privileges an open-ended process over a predefined technique. This is reflected in the first author's commitment to modifying methods in light of the preferences and characteristics of different young people (Ansell *et al*., 2012). We now demonstrate this by discussing individual and friendship group interviews. It is worth highlighting though, that there are difficulties in adopting a truly open-ended approach, given the structure and nature of many university ethics committees (Skelton, 2008).

### *Individual and Friendship Group Interviews*

Thirty-five young people opted in to the interview method. Individual interviews enabled the first author to gain insight into the participants' perceptions, which are subjective in nature (e.g.

of their motivations for drinking, how they feel when they drink, where they like to drink), (Kaar, 2007). Whilst the individual interview has its benefits, there are also drawbacks. Some young people did not feel comfortable participating in a one-to-one interview with an adult researcher, and asked to be interviewed with their friends. To address this, the first author implemented a friendship group style of interviewing. The first author had not intended to use this method; this illustrates the agency of participants to shape the research design, and the need for researchers to be flexible.

There are advantages of conducting interviews in friendship groups for substance use research. Friendship group interviews create a non-threatening and comfortable atmosphere for participants to share drinking experiences (Renold, 2005). Moreover, friendship group interviews provide access to interaction between participants (Miller *et al*., 2010) – this helped tease out the importance of friendship and care to young people's drinking practices (see name removed for anonymity). Overall, friendship group interviews allowed the researcher to collect data that otherwise may not be accessible (Miller *et al*., 2010). Although occasionally suppressed by more dominant friends, less confident participants may not have participated in the research otherwise. When researching young people's alcohol consumption practices, the presence of adults may restrict young people from speaking about their experiences and thoughts surrounding drinking (Katainen and Rolando, 2015). Recognising the 'otherness' (see Jones, 2008) of participants younger than herself, the first author also employed peer interviews.

*Peer Interviews*

Thirteen young people opted into the 'peer interview' method. Peer interviews acknowledge that young people's experiences of spaces and places differ from those of adults (Schäfer and Yarwood, 2008). Young people are suitable for conducting peer interviews because they speak the same language as other young people (Kilpatrick *et al*., 2007). Further, they often have first-hand insights into matters affecting peers, as they are often affected by these issues themselves (McCartan *et al*., 2012). As Alderson (2008:278) rhetorically questions, if young people's "social relations and culture are worthy of study in their own right, then who is better qualified to research some aspects of their lives than [young people] themselves?" Despite contentions that peer interviews can offer a "genuine perspective" into young people's lives

(Schäfer and Yarwood, 2008:4), we found that peer interviews provided a space for some young people to playfully fabricate their drinking stories. Take the following exchange:

Rik: Can you tell me what you get up to on a night out?
Oscar: Get a taxi to town [said in an ironic tone].
Rik: And get wankered in the Union [laughs].
Oscar: And meet some ladies.
Rik: Meet some ladies and take them back to my house.
Oscar: [Laughs].
Rik: And you know where to go from there don't ya.
Oscar: [Laughs].
Rik: No, I'm only joking, only joking
(Rik and Oscar, 15, Wythenshawe, peer interview)

Oscar and Rik, aged 15, quoted above, playfully fabricated accounts of their drunkenness through hyperbolic descriptions, in order to perform and produce particular kinds of 'cool' masculinities through their alcohol consumption. The notion that this story 206 is an embellished one can be gleamed through: the ironic tone in which the young people spoke; the laughing which permeated this section of the peer interview; and Rik's frank admission at the end, in which he states "no, I'm only joking, only joking". As von Benzon (2015) says, silencing playful contributions can risk losing valuable data, and ignoring one form of young people's voices. We argue that the young people's fantasies are interesting in illuminating their ingrained assumptions about alcohol consumption. For instance, Rik and Oscar appear to assume that alcohol is associated with enabling men to meet women, and to have sexual relationships.

A drawback of standalone interviews (whether individual, friendship group or peer-led) is that participants often do not feel as if they have much time to think through their answers - an immediate response is expected (Literat, 2013). Recognising this, the first author also offered young people the choice of participating in drawing elicitation interviews.

*Drawing Elicitation Interviews*

Seventeen young people in the study opted into the drawing elicitation interview method. Each drawing elicitation interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and took place in spaces participants felt safe and comfortable in, including: schools, homes, and cafes. Through the drawing-elicitation interview, "the visual representation becomes a process of 'working through', rather than spontaneously responding" (Literat, 2013:210). After providing the young people with a blank sheet of A3 paper and a pack of colouring felt tip pens and some pencils, the first author asked the participants to draw free-hand sketch-maps of their drinking spaces and places. Discussing their maps enabled participants to look back on their products reflexively, along with giving them an additional medium through which to express their thoughts (Lehman-Frisch *et al*., 2012). Inviting participants to interpret their own maps further facilitated a sense of empowerment, as the researcher became a respectful listener of the young participants who were in charge of the discussion (Literat, 2013).

Through its combination of visual and oral methods, the drawing elicitation interview enabled an understanding of the complexity of young people's relationships with drinking spaces (Lehman-Frisch *et al*., 2012). While the first author anticipated that the maps would offer a static snapshot of drinking spaces, she was surprised that young people's mobilities came through in their drawings. Many young people drew arrows to signal their movements in, through, and beyond, drinking spaces. This method had its weaknesses as, despite the first author's reassurances, some young people lacked confidence in their drawing abilities (Rose, 2012). It was therefore important to offer alternative methods that do not rely on drawing, or oral communication.

*Diaries*

Diaries are a method through which young people can express themselves, perhaps with less embarrassment, or fewer feelings of being judged, than in interview scenarios. This can be captured through Kelly's (17, Wythenshawe, drawing elicitation interview) comment: "ah I'll have to write about it, I can't, I'm not saying that, I'll write about it". Eleven young people in the study completed the diary method, five young men and six young women. The first author asked the young people to complete unstructured solicited written diaries, regarding their alcohol consumption experiences, over a minimum of three weeks. Leyshon (2002) contends that utilising a written diary method with young people is challenging, as they perceive it to be time-consuming and it may feel like a form of homework. However, some young people in the

study were enthusiastic about keeping a written diary; some participants claimed to have "never had a diary before" (Jemima, 15, Wythenshawe, interview). Far from a tedious homework-like task, for some young people, keeping a diary 253 was novel and exciting.

Diaries yield considerable benefits for substance use research. First, as the diary method was not undertaken face-to-face, it made it easier for young people to be more candid about their drinking practices and experiences than in face-to-face methods (Milligan, 2005). Second, by enabling participants to document their own drinking practices, in their own space and time, a more empowering research relationship emerged between young people and the researcher.

The first author found that one of the drawbacks of using diaries is that several young people opted to participate in this method, yet never returned their diaries. An additional downfall with using diaries for research is that they depend on the participant's writing skills (Buchwald *et al*., 2009). Relatedly, the first author was often disappointed by the limited detail some of the completed diaries contained. In addition to oral, written, and artistic mediums, it is important to offer alternative methods, which enable young people who are technologically skilled to communicate their thoughts on alcohol, drinking and drunkenness.

This is now illustrated through a discussion of mobile phone interviews and text messaging (see reference removed for anonymity).

*Mobile Phone Interviews*

The first author had planned to ask young people to send her photographs and videos on their nights out, via their mobile phones. Despite gaining ethical approval to do so, this approach was not suitable 'in practice' because of the costs involved with sending photograph and video messages. Whilst many young people held a mobile phone contract, which often allows unlimited text messages to be sent, often this does not include photograph or video messages, which, in the UK, are typically charged at 30-40 pence per message. The first author developed and refined the research design through listening to the experiences of a young person in her study; Heather (15, Wythenshawe, interview) stated: "there's a party on Friday. I'll video some of it through the night on my mobile, like video bits and I'll come in and show you". Mobile phone interviews involved asking young people to use their phones to take photographs and videos on their nights out. The first author then met the young people individually, a few days

after the event, and asked them to navigate through relevant photographs and videos on their phones. The visual data then served as prompts to elicit discussion in an informal interview.

Some of the benefits of mobile phone interviews for substance use research are as follows: asking participants to take photographs and videos enabled "ethnography by proxy" (Bloustein and Baker 2003:72), for spaces that may be difficult for a researcher to gain access to, such as homes of participants' friends and relatives. Further, the mobile phone offered participants an opportunity to 'show', rather than solely 'tell', aspects of their drinking identities that may have otherwise remained hidden (as Croghan *et al*., 2008 note of photo elicitation methods). In line with this, the interview element of this method acted as a means of triangulating what young people *said* they did, with what the photographs and videos *showed* they did. Further, mobile phones changed the materiality of interviewing participants; the young people were, to some extent, 'in charge', whilst the researcher largely watched the scenes unfold.

*Text Messaging*

Ten young people in the study opted into the text messaging method (eight of which were young women, and two young men). Text messages were used as data in two predominant ways. Firstly, conversations the first author had with the young people, via text messages, regarding nights in/out that they had invited her to, were a valuable form of data. The first author asked the young people about their plans regarding: where they were going; what they would wear; what they would drink; whom they were meeting, and so forth. Secondly, the first author asked participants to update her, via text messages, of their experiences and practices during their nights in/out involving alcohol, when she was not present.

Researchers have typically undervalued text messages as a source of data. Whilst diary entries are often perceived to require literacy skills, texting requires a different type of literacy skill, enabling the inclusion of young people with a range of abilities (Walker *et al*., 2009). Further, social anxiety may cause some young people to prefer technological communication, rather than face-to-face communication (Pierce, 2009). Text messaging is a particularly important method when researching substance use because most other methods, such as diaries and interviews, require participants to remember and recall events, which can be problematic with memory impairment associated with alcohol consumption. The date-and time-stamped text messages provide an "experience snapshot" (Plowman and Stevenson, 2012:539) of young people's alcohol-related, present-tense, actions. Overall, text messaging offered an informal,

undemanding, and unobtrusive, means of understanding young people's drinking practices and experiences, as they unfolded. Text messaging is a research technique in line with many young people's everyday/everynight practices. For young people in the first author's study, and as Leyshon *et al*. (2013) make clear, text messaging is a culturally legible means of communication.

Those researching drinking practices, whether through interviews, diaries, drawings, or mobile phone methods, must contend with the issue that people do not always do as they say they do (Holloway *et al*., 2008). This may be due to worries about being judged by the researcher or peer-researchers, for instance. It is for this reason that the 326 first author also deployed participant observation as a method for young people to 'opt into'.

*Participant Observation*

The first author undertook participant observation over a period of 12 months. She observed the drinking practices of seven different young people and their friends participating in the research. She went on 21 nights out/in in total, lasting a minimum of three hours, and up to a maximum of twelve hours. She undertook approximately 96 hours of participant observation in total, in a diverse range of spaces, including: pubs, bars, clubs, casinos, streets, parks, and homes, and for a variety of occasions, including routine nights out, to more celebratory occasions, such as an 18th birthday party. By "hanging out" with participants (Kusenbach, 2003:463), the first author was able to explore young people's drinking experiences as they moved through, and interacted with, their surroundings. The first author considers that her age, appearance, personality and drinking biography were key factors that enticed young people to invite her on their nights out. We cannot help but think that an older, less fashionable researcher, who abstained from alcohol consumption, for instance, would not have been so openly invited to selectively invited 'special occasions', such as 18th birthday parties. It is worth noting that the first author was going to offer the method of participant observation later in the study, when she had built up a level of trust and confidence with the participants. However, upon explaining the study to participants at a first meeting, one participant stated: "why don't you just come on a night out with us?". Participant observation, to participants, seemed like a logical way of gleaming insight into their drinking experiences.

By joining young people as they moved in and between different spaces, the first author, acquired an understanding of young people's embodied drinking practices, and the multi sensory nature of drinking experiences (Langevang, 2007). This included the role of music, the impact of darkness and lightness (reference removed for anonymity), the taste of particular alcoholic drinks, the smell of vomit, and the importance of touch, for instance, when caring for drunken friends. To provide an example, when the first author went out with participants to a club for an 18th 354 birthday party, participant observation provided support for the notion that drunkenness is not about alcohol alone (see Jayne *et al*., 2010). The music, lighting, (non) alcoholic drinks, and bodies were all materials acting on the researcher, influencing her corporeal experiences of space, and making a difference to the social experiences of alcohol consumption (Duff, 2012). The can be illustrated through the following passage from the first author's field diary:

> It is interesting that, despite only having one vodka and coke, I felt drunk. Normally, I require a certain number of drinks in order to have the confidence to dance. However, tonight, being surrounded by other mobile drunken bodies, the darkness of the club, and the thump of the upbeat music, increased my ability to dance uninhibited…I even found myself participating in the Gangnam Style dance[1] without feeling self conscious!
>
> (Field diary, night out with Maisy, 18, and friends, Wythenshawe)

From the above extract, one can see that the first author experienced a transformation, her body 'became' drunk, through its practices and encounters in assemblages with other drunken bodies, the sonic environment, and lighting in the affectively charged space (Waitt and Stanes, 2015). Such visceral insights are not easily obtained through other methods. Having provided an overview of the strengths and weaknesses, and the complimentary nature of the interdisciplinary methods underpinning this study, this paper now concludes.

**Concluding Remarks**

[1] A pop single by the South Korean musician Psy, released in 2012, renowned for the choreography and moves in its music video, including gallop, lasso, leg sweep, flick, shuffle, pop and pose.

This paper has outlined a substance use study characterised by "pockets" of co-production (Franks, 2011:15). In this paper, we have argued that when conducting substance use research 'with' young people, researchers should offer palette of diverse, yet complementary, methods for participants to 'opt into'. Such methods could include, but are by no means limited to: interviews, peer interviews, drawing elicitation interviews, diaries, mobile phone interviews, young people in this study with the space and time they needed to communicate the complexities of their lives (Langevang, 2007). This paper has also argued for the need to privilege an open-ended process to conducting substance use research (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008); for instance, by modifying methods in light of the preferences and characteristics of specific young people (Ansell *et al*., 2012).

Each method deployed in this study was argued to have its own strengths for researching into young people's drinking. Interviews offered in-depth insight into alcohol consumption practices and experiences, and friendship group interviews provided a comfortable setting for young people to discuss their drinking stories and have their voices heard. Whilst young people may feel uncomfortable articulating drinking stories to an adult researcher, peer interviews addressed this. Peer interviews provided interesting data as, whilst young people sometimes fabricated drinking stories, such embellishments illuminated their ingrained assumptions about alcohol consumption. Whilst interviews (individual, friendship or peer led) often require an immediate response, drawing elicitation interviews gave participants a chance to 'think through' drinking practices and experiences. Drawing elicitation interviews also enabled insight into young people's alcohol-related im/mobilities.

Additionally, diaries were argued to provide a space for more candid drinking accounts. Whilst diaries rely on participants' writing ability, mobile phone methods enabled those more technologically skilled and minded to participate in the research. Mobile phone interviews enabled young people to 'show and tell' the researcher about their alcohol consumption practices and experiences - through a culturally credible medium, whilst text messaging provided real-time updates of drinking practices as they unfolded. Finally, although many methods relied on participants' versions of drinking events, participant observation enabled the researcher to both see and *feel* multi-sensory and embodied drinking experiences. As this paper has demonstrated, by being equipped with a palette of methods, the strengths of one method can offset the weaknesses of another (Cresswell and Clark, 2011).

The palette of interdisciplinary methods deployed in this study enabled the researcher to triangulate the research findings. Importantly, it also gave participants the opportunity to communicate with the researcher in ways they were comfortable with, and found meaningful. By being honest about the successes and failures of deploying specific methods when exploring young people's alcohol consumption practices and experiences, this paper is valuable for researchers in, and beyond, the field of substance use, seeking to both broaden their methodological toolkit, and research 'with' participants in culturally legible ways. We are not suggesting that the methods outlined in this paper should be extracted by researchers for substance use research. Rather, we contend that researchers must be attentive at listening to, and becoming attuned to, the methodological preferences of the specific group of participants in their study, and consequently adapt their methodological offerings to enable participants to communicate with researchers "on their own terms" (Leyshon *et al*., 2013:180).

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**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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