The role of positionality in research 'gone wrong': Critical reflections on research involving young people

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Abstract

In this Viewpoint, we consider the importance of positionality in research 'gone wrong'. We focus on the intersections of age, gender and appearance. Reflecting on two doctoral research projects involving young people (one about alcohol consumption practices and another about community radio), researched by us - young female researchers, we reveal unanticipated ethical dilemmas from the field. These include: being fancied by a male participant; a young male participant asking if he could stay at the researcher's home; and being asked to buy alcohol for young participants. Now established academics, we feel able to reflect critically on such complex and unanticipated research situations. We hope being candid about these ethical quandaries will inspire the next generation of children's geographers to consider the importance of reflexivity around positionality as they embrace the inherent messiness of research ethics.

Key words: ethics; positionality; reflexivity; young people

Introduction

This Viewpoint piece builds on an earlier Viewpoint, also focussed on positionality, published in *Children's Geographies* (ANON, 2016), when the second author was a doctoral student. In this new paper we consider the importance of positionality in research 'gone wrong'. Reflecting on two doctoral research projects involving young people (one about alcohol consumption practices and another about community radio), researched by us - young female researchers, we reveal unanticipated ethical dilemmas from the field. These include: being fancied by a male participant; a young male participant asking if he could stay at the researcher's home; and

being asked to buy alcohol for young people. Now, with the benefit of time and professional distance (as tenured academics and not early career scholars trying to secure academic positions in a competitive job market), we revisit and critically reflect on some of ANON's (2016) earlier discussions of age, gender and appearance. Through presenting three case studies from our research we highlight instances of research 'gone wrong' and the significance of positionality in these different scenarios. We hope that being candid about these ethical quandaries will inspire the next generation of children's geographers to consider the importance of reflexivity around positionality as they embrace the inherent messiness of research ethics.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a brief review of literature related to positionality in social and geographical research. Following an overview of our respective doctoral research studies, we present three case studies, each detailing a research encounter 'gone wrong': being fancied by a male participant (1); a young male participant asking if he could stay at the researcher's home (2); and being asked to buy alcohol for young participants (3). These case studies enable us to raise important issues which build on current debates regarding positionality in research with young people, also enabling critical reflection on unanticipated ethical dilemmas in the field.

Positionality in social and geographical research

Whilst much has been written on positionality, the ways in which the researcher's appearance, beyond relatively fixed attributes, such as race and gender, shapes research encounters has been largely neglected. Until ANON's (2016) discussion in the pages of *Children's Geographies*, there has been a lack of attention to researcher personality and appearance in discussions of positionality.

Lack of focus on the researcher's personality is a significant oversight, as personality is capable of shaping the research process and outcome (Moser, 2008). For, as Hadfield-Hill and Horton (2014, p. 148) tell, "we are never just researchers, just doing research", in the same way as our participants are not just participants in research. This quotation highlights the 'baggage' researchers brings with them to the research, and the importance of acknowledging and confronting this baggage, as opposed to denying its existence. We are in agreement with Sultana (2007) that who we are, and the way we interact with participants, is essential in developing relationships premised on trust. An exception to the cold descriptions of positionality is Widdowfield's (2000) discussion of the place of emotions in academic research.

Widdowfield (2000) argues that emotions may influence the researcher's interpretation of a situation, yet this does not prevent rigorous analysis.

Important too to bring to the discussion of positionality is researcher appearance. This constitutes a range of different elements, including skin colour, hair colour and style, height, weight, age, and the clothes the researcher wears. Entwistle (2000, p. 10) recognises that the way we dress is "more than a shell", it is a personal facet of the experience and presentation of one's self. Spanger (2012) notes how the attractiveness, or lack thereof, of the researcher affects the interaction between researcher and participants. In her ethnographic research with Thai migrant sex workers, Spanger (2012), aware of how the intersection of the categories of race and gender could position her as a sex worker from the male customers' gaze, decided not to wear 'sexy' clothing during her visits to bars. Instead, in order to perform 'another' femininity, she wore jeans and a jumper. McCurdy and Uldam (2013) also note in their research into social movements that they dressed in casual clothes, and therefore blended in with participants. Importantly, Muggleton (2000, p. 90), in his discussion of subcultures, cautions that "those who merely 'adopt' an unconventional appearance without possessing the necessary 'inner' qualities are regarded…as 'plastic', not 'real'…a subcultural 'Other'". Leyshon (2002) also argues that imitating the appearance of research participants to achieve acceptance can damage researcher credibility. Having provided an overview of literature pertaining to positionality, we now outline the research studies we refer to in this paper. Having an understanding of the significance of personality and appearance to positionality will be important when reflecting on ethics in situ in the case studies we will present following this brief overview.

Overview of Research Projects

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ANON's research project explored the alcohol consumption practices and experiences of 40 young people, aged 15–24, living in the suburban case study locations of Wythenshawe and Chorlton, Manchester, UK. This research was conducted *with* young people, using a flexible suite of methods which they could opt into (see ANON), including: interviews; peer interviews; drawing elicitation interviews; diaries; mobile phone methods; and participant observation.

Offering a palette of methods enabled participants to participate in ways that were meaningful to them.

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ANON's research project explored how youth-led community radio station KCC Live in Knowsley, neighbouring Liverpool, UK, provides a space for young people to find and realise their voices, build stocks of social capital, and create their own communities. The station typically has a 14–25 year-old volunteer base. A participatory design was adopted in collaboration with 21 volunteers/staff members. Mixed methods were employed, including: 18 months of observant participation; interviews and focus groups with volunteers; interviews with management; a listener survey, listener diaries, and follow-up interviews.

Research Encounters 'Gone Wrong'

Case study 1: Being fancied by a male participant

As Leyshon (2002) tells, mimicking the appearance of participants to gain acceptance can damage the researcher's credibility. At the time of conducting the research, I (ANON) was in my early twenties, with an eye for fashion. I was not attempting to 'mimic' the young people's appearance; rather I engineered my body by choosing outfits I perceived would suit the different research spaces and participants. This varied if I was conducting an interview in a heavily male dominated college (where I would dress casually), interviewing women (where I dressed more fashionably), or interviewing parents (where I dressed more smartly), or accompanying young people to a nightclub (where I 'dressed up').

Whilst I aimed for subjective, intimate, and emotionally close relationships in the field, I became "too good at fitting in" (Berbary, 2014, p. 1205), leading to moments of "over-rapport" (Irwin, 2006, p. 157). What Blackman (2007, p. 707) refers to as "sex in the field" - including love, romance and flirtation - are often part of the "hidden ethnography". I wish to disclose my experience of flirtation in the field. No amount of ethical guidelines could have prepared me for the everydayness/everynightness of research encounters, where situations happened suddenly. In such instances, I had to respond what I considered to be ethically in situ:

> During the night out, it transpired that Milly fancied Carl a lot. I asked Carl if he liked Milly (after Milly had asked me to do so numerous times that night), and he told me "not in that way" – he declared really fancying me and said he loved my eyes and blonde hair and my accent and that obviously I'm older so I "won't be interested", but he reassured me that I can have anyone I liked.
>
> (Friday 20/12/2013, night out with Vera, Milly, Danny, Carl age 15-16)

Upon receiving the compliments, my reaction was discomfort at 15-year-old Carl's attraction towards me. At the time, I was embarrassed by the comments, and tried to change the topic. I also worried about the tension this may cause in my friendship with Milly. Following this encounter, the next time I went out with the group I managed my appearance, by not wearing fake eyelashes, 'toning down' my makeup, and deliberately 'dressing down' (see Leyshon, 2008). Through these restrictive bodily acts (Campbell, 2005), I actively 'undid' femininity. That is, I worked to negotiate how my body could be 'read' by Carl (see Parr, 1998). It is worth considering, however, that such acts may have been unnecessary. Alcohol can contribute to the production of "beer goggles" (Bohling, 2015, p. 128), thereby broadening the range of bodies Carl found attractive. Alcoholic assemblages then, may have brought me into being as 'momentarily' attractive, rendering futile future efforts to make myself undesirable.

Case study 2: A young male participant asking if he could stay at the researcher's home

After I (ANON) left KCC Live each evening, I was often inundated with phone calls and text messages from the young volunteers. I always responded – as I did with all of my friends – primarily because I considered the young people at KCC Live to be my friends, but also because I felt it was ethical and respectful to do so. Hall (2009, p. 268) tells how the anxiety over 'using' participants within the field is a regular dilemma of ethnography, resulting in feelings of guilt.

A further example of this is when a young male participant, Karl (aged 15), asked to stay the night at my house. I lived closer to the radio station than he did, therefore it would make his journey into the radio station the next day, with an unusually early start, less daunting. It is important to draw on my multiple positioning. KCC Live is based in a college; in this respect I was considered a pseudo-employee of the college, though I functioned as a KCC Live volunteer. In addition to this, Karl was not a student of the college, only a volunteer at the radio station. In this respect, there was no official safeguarding issue surrounding allowing him to

stay at my house. However, the situation was complicated by the fact that I had previously been told that Karl fancied me, or as one volunteer more dramatically put it "he's in love with you". With this knowledge in mind, I decided not to let the participant stay and resultantly was left feeling terribly guilty.

Certainly, being told of this young person's affection towards me led me to reflexively consider whether my feminine and embellished appearance, or indeed my bubbly and friendly personality, was responsible for this crush. I questioned whether this situation was avoidable and even if so – why should I be concerned with avoiding it? It is natural and typically unproblematic when it occurs outside of the field. As told by Grauerholz et al. (2013, p. 168), who discuss attraction to those we study rather than attraction to the researcher: "attraction is a normal, commonplace occurrence, especially among persons who spend significant amounts of time together (such as the ethnographer and respondents)". All of this says a lot about the messiness of friendships in research, and of multiple positions. Yet despite such momentary feelings of confusion, in line with (Fox, 2007), I believe that intimacy between researcher and participants can lead to long-term genuine friendships.

Case study 3: Being asked to buy alcohol for young people.

I (ANON) am bubbly and chatty and believe my personality assisted me in developing relationships with participants, which maintained their interest in the research project. Like Hall (2009), however, I argue that research friendships, as with any friendships, can be tested, as the following excerpts reveal:

> When in the school interviewing Vera and Jemima [15], they asked me if I would come out with them that Friday, stating, "you can go into the shop for us". Basically, they believed that in exchange for me observing their drinking practices, I would purchase alcohol on their behalf
>
> (Field diary, 21/01/2014)

> You meeting us tonight? We're going to try and get into The White Lion [pub]
>
> (Vera, 15, text message)

I was concerned by Vera's contention that she was "going to try and get into The White Lion" because, having interviewed her only a few days previously, I knew that she had never tried to access a bar, pub or nightclub. Through both these situations, I began to experience feelings of

annoyance and stress. I believed that Jemima and Vera, as young people under the legal drinking age, were 'using' me - as a then-23 year old - in order to negotiate their access to alcohol and commercial premises. This ethically complex situation did not materialise, as Vera sent a text message shortly after stating she had changed her mind and that she going to "hang around the streets" instead. Regarding the encounter with Jemima, I explicitly told her that "I am not allowed to purchase alcohol for her, under any circumstances" (field diary, 21/01/2014). When she invited me out on subsequent occasions, I reinforced this each time. I began to realise that I was not, and could not, be friends with my participants. Yet, as Blackman (2007, p. 703) found in his research, this is not to downplay the "friendship moments" we shared.

In the next section, with the benefit of time and professional distance, we critically reflect on the ethical quandaries in the three research encounters 'gone wrong' recounted above.

Discussion and critical reflection

In conducting ethnographic fieldwork with young people, we navigated relationships with participants that were individual, emotional, corporeal and intellectual (see also Mason, 2002). Concerning researcher proximity, we did not wish to be perceived as 'omnipotent experts' (England, 1994). To this end, we positioned ourselves as 'researcher as friend', an extension of what Fuller (1999, p. 221) terms "researcher as person". Some examples of this include how we accepted the young people's 'friend requests' on Facebook; shared our mobile phone numbers; and invited participants to call us by our nicknames (REMOVED FOR ANONYMITY). As such, like Gallagher (2008), we did not exert our power as 'adult researchers'.

It is important to mention our age in relation to our participants. As Skelton (2008) tells, in research with children, researchers can be considered both 'insiders' and 'outsiders', as they have all once been children (insider), but now as adults, they are outsiders. However, when we commenced our research we were both in our early twenties, in this sense age was not a key marker of difference. On reflection, both our intentional positioning and natural biographical positioning in relation to our participants undoubtedly contributed to the three research encounters 'gone wrong', though this is counterbalanced against positives gained from this positioning, including rapport built with participants and rich data gathered.

Referring to case study 1, where ANON was the recipient of flirtation from a participant, we of course do not blame ANON for receiving this unwarranted attention. This is important to acknowledge in line with victim blaming debates and 'what was she wearing? [1]' narratives. However, we do recognise, following Thrift (2008), that clothing produces corporeal stances, which can be 'read' (see Parr, 1998) in certain ways. This point is echoed by Gokanksel (2009) who claims that dress acts upon the body, transforming the self physically and emotionally. With this in mind, when interviewing young people, wearing fashionable, casual clothes is one way we deployed our bodies in an attempt to 'fit in' (Thurnell-Read, 2011), rather than distancing ourselves as 'other' (as may have been the case if we wore a suit, for instance). This dress code also assisted in making us feel comfortable which we feel, in turn, enabled participants to relax (see also Leyshon, 2002). Perrone (2010, p. 730) encapsulates this through her claim that "we negotiate our gender and sexual identities, and shift our personalities and style of dress to represent ourselves in the most appropriate and comfortable manner for gaining access and establishing rapport throughout the fieldwork". Following Berbary (2014), we argue that highlighting similarities to participants through our self-presentation functioned as a methodological tool for negotiating personal connections.

Regarding Case study 2, whereby a young male participant asked if he could stay at ANON's home, it is important to mention that this scenario was omitted from her doctoral thesis. ANON made the decision to omit this through fear of reprisal from those reading her thesis (first and foremost examiners), considering that it reflected badly on her as a novice researcher who naively assumed she could be friends with participants or indeed who wrongly blurred boundaries between participant and friend. Reflecting on his difficulties in establishing clear boundaries in his ethnographic study on homeless young families, Blackman (2007, p. 703) tells how he could not be the participants' friend because he "could not be like them", but that they "shared 'friendship moments'". Blackman's (2007) work links back nicely onto ideas generated by Cotterill (1992, p. 599), who discusses the blur between "research friendship and friendship". FIRST AUTHOR in Case study 3 likewise shares this sentiment when she reflects that she could not be a genuine friend to the young participants in her study. However, when undertaking her doctoral research, ANON found it problematic that academic writing believes that you can only be a 'researcher' or a 'friend', but not both. ANON believed she could be a genuine friend to the young people and, as such, she sought to create a relationship based on

[1] The scapegoat argument blaming women's attire for sexual violence has been used in court countless times to the detriment of the sexual violence community.

mutual respect. Many of the friendships ANON made have stood the test of time, and even eight years after ANON's fieldwork ended she keeps in regular contact with two study participants.

Also in Case study 3, ANON reflects on an incident where she was asked to buy alcohol for young people, and another where a young person wished to use her to facilitate entry into a pub. Whilst existing literature has considered how researchers can 'use' participants in order to obtain data, for instance, by only staying in contact when they need something (see Hall, 2009; 2014), ANON explores the reverse of this. ANON conceives of her positionality as an assemblage (Law, 2004), including, but not limited to, age, appearance, and personality. More than this, she appreciates that her attitude towards and personal experiences of consuming alcohol, were aspects of her positionality that could not be tucked away (see also England, 1994). The fact that she enjoyed drinking alcohol was, ANON believes, fundamental in establishing her credentials as someone who was genuinely interested and who could empathise with many of her participant's drinking experiences (see also Malbon, 1999). ANON happily disclosed aspects of her drinking biography to participants, in order to facilitate a trustworthy relationship, in which she was, in some ways, 'one of them'. As Advocat and Lindsay (2013) argue, when interviewers are not peers, participants may downplay negative aspects of their drinking, portraying their drinking practices in a positive light. Further, ANON cannot help but think that an older researcher would not have been so frequently invited to nightclubs and selectively invited 'special occasions', such as 18th birthday parties. Thus ANON's specific 'cocktail' of positionality is one that she feels facilitated more intimate, detailed research encounters with participants that shared a similar biography and lived experiences.

Conclusion

Writing this paper, with the benefit of time and professional distance, has provided us with a unique opportunity to reflect on situations we had to deal with promptly during fieldwork and that no amount of ethics training could have prepared us for. In particular, we have considered the important role of positionality in research 'gone wrong'. We focused on the intersections of age, gender and appearance. We conclude that both our intentional positioning (characterised through deliberate decisions in how we dressed our bodies) and natural biographical positioning (our age) in relation to our participants undoubtedly contributed to the research encounters 'gone wrong' presented in the three case studies. Though, this is counterbalanced against positives gained from this positioning, including rapport built with

participants and rich data gathered. We hope being candid about our ethical quandaries will inspire the next generation of children's geographers to consider the importance of reflexivity around positionality as they embrace the inherent messiness of research ethics.

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