



Ethnographic research with young people: methods and rapport.

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper accounts for, and reflects upon, the research design and the methodological approach adopted in ethnographic research with young people. In particular, the paper reinforces the significance of conducting qualitative participatory and innovative methods with young people, alongside the value of rapport building.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative participatory methods are understood as the most appropriate way to empower and respect young people in the research process. Alongside such methods the ethnographic nature of the research is discussed in conveying the importance of rapport building with young people in the field. In doing so the paper examines a number of important considerations when conducting youth research.

Findings – The triangulation of qualitative methods was fundamental in exploring and understanding young people’s lives in each locality and allowed for deep and meaningful explorations of specific themes. The additional and complementary methods employed alongside traditional methods was particularly suited to understanding young people’s everyday lives, as complex experiences are not always conveyed through traditional methods alone. Conducting participatory methods produced narratives around safety, security and governance in public places.

Originality/value – Being reflexive and adapting to a research setting in order to enhance the process of building and maintaining trust with young people is the most important facet when conducting youth research. Giving careful consideration to the impact of a researcher’s presence in the field needs to be carefully navigated.

Keywords: Ethnography, Young People, Methodology, Participatory, Rapport.

Paper type: Research paper

Understanding and exploring young people's lives

It is essential to foreground the way in which identifiable groups of young people are viewed and conceptualised in contemporary society when conducting research that explores their lives. This can be achieved through recognising the ways in which childhoods are socially constructed, appreciating the significance of child-adult relations and by applying a children and young person's human rights framework. Socio-historical contextualisation enables an appreciation of 'the adult-centred view of the child's world' (Emond, 2000: 98). Viewing childhood as a social construction and emphasising the social, political and economic contexts within which it is lived, provides the foundations upon which the methodological framework of this research was situated, which this paper discusses.

Young people are regularly scrutinised, monitored, and regulated because they have not yet reached 'adulthood'. As Goldson (1997: 19) argues 'age is a fundamental determinant in the distribution of rights, power and participation and children by virtue of their junior years and their institutional dependence on adults have limitations imposed upon their citizenship'. Additionally, the structural relations of class, race, gender and sexuality shape particular constructions of childhood (Goldson, 1997) and reveal that not all childhoods are universally experienced in the same way and that youth is not a homogeneous category (Cohen, 1997). The impact of class, in particular, and the ethnographic research revealed 'the continuing sociological relevance of class and place in understanding the lived experience' (MacDonald et al., 2005: 885).

The favoured methodological approach here, ethnography, places young people at the centre of the research as 'experts in their own worlds' (Thomson, 2008; Abebe, 2009). When conducting research with children and young people, ethnography is a 'natural choice' method (James and Prout, 1997). Employing ethnographic methods shares and extends a tradition articulated by other youth researchers (see Thomson, 2008; Heath et al., 2009; Freeman and Mathison, 2009; and Lewis and Lindsay, 2000), where an appreciation of children and young people's rights are paramount. This commitment to a framework encompassing children's and young people's human rights explicitly acknowledges that 'children have the right to say what they think... and have their opinions taken into account' (Article 12 of The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989). The qualitative methods

employed in this research ensured that young people were given the opportunity to articulate their experiences and perceptions concerning policing, safety and security throughout the fieldwork.

Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN Convention 1989), by the UK government, various policies and procedural measures have been implemented to incorporate and promote children’s human rights. Within the academy, this has been accompanied by the increased use of participatory methods and approaches that facilitate the right of children and young people to participate actively in research. Although children and young people have not always been seen as active constructors of social meaning (Freeman and Mathison 2009), over the past twenty years more progressive developments in the ways in which childhood and youth are viewed have impacted upon research. The ‘new sociology of childhood’ recognised ‘the discovery of children as agents’ and some commentators have argued that this has placed children and young people more centrally within key aspects of social science research (James et al., 1998:164). The research methods presented here is symptomatic of the more explicit rights-based approach that has become more commonplace in youth research (James et al., 1998).

However, the naturalistic stance of ethnography has been criticised for its descriptive nature and lack of methodological rigour (see Emond, 2000). Much of the criticism revolves around a researcher’s impact on the data through their presence in the field and the recording and interpreting of observations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Foster (1996) considers these implications and the bias that may occur when a researcher interprets the data. Despite this, techniques such as reflexivity, triangulation and respondent validation can be used, and were in this research, to assess the validity of the data and to minimise any corrupting influence that my presence and role as a researcher might have imposed (Foster 1996: 90). Acknowledging the importance of reflexivity, ‘where a researcher must question their own role in the research process’ (Delanty, 2005: 121), was applied throughout the entire research process.

Participatory research: dilemmas, distinctions and diversity

The legitimacy of involving young people in research and the participatory nature of their involvement are debated issues. Indeed, the very definition of participation, and the various

levels at which young people are enabled to participate in the research process, raises key questions for youth researchers. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) and Boyden and Ennew (1997) define participation as taking part in some predefined activity. O’Kane (2000:140) refers to participation as ‘handling things rather than just talking’ and Pain et al (2000) suggests that participation should result in positive change. Pain and Francis (2004) claim that young people should be involved in the research process from beginning to end. Subsequently, the varying ways in which young people might be involved in the research process has informed different perspectives on the subject. Some researchers advocate that this should be at the stage of research design (Kirby, 2004; Alderson, 2001; Holland et al., 2001). For others it should be at the stage of data generation (Murray 2006; Clark et al., 2001), or in the interpretation of findings and at the stage of dissemination (Holland et al., 2001). Heath et al., (2009) suggest there are many reasons beyond a researcher’s control that restrict the involvement of young people at least at some stages of the research process. For example, dependence on funding, sponsors, or time scales. The research presented here was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and, as such, the submission of a research proposal and the designated research design developed before the fieldwork began, making it difficult to involve young people at the initial conceptual phrases of the research process.

There is a clear distinction between participatory methods and a comprehensive participatory approach in youth research literature. The latter is often characterised as research designed and conducted collaboratively between researchers and researched in order to enable positive action and change (Pain et al., 2000). More traditional research may include participatory methods, but this does not necessarily make it participatory research, and there is no such claim being made here. The research presented here combined ‘traditional’ qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups and observations) with more explicitly participatory methods (visual methods and activities such as photography, brainstorming, mapping, drawings and flip chart exercises).

The more explicit participatory methods emphasised that the young people’s voices were central to the research and that they were regarded as ‘meaningfully engaged independent social actors’ (Best, 2007: 10). Providing opportunities for a range of task-centred activities (Heath et al., 2009), including photography, drawn representations and posters, gave the young people a greater sense of control in the research process. Young people also chose

which activities to participate and not participate in, which went some way towards redressing the power imbalances between the researcher (myself) and the research participants (Heath et al., 2009; Punch, 2002; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Morrow, 2008; Grover, 2004). It is argued that the participation of young people is generally experienced positively (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008) and provides one way of empowering them (Cahill, 2004). Furthermore, exploring qualitative methods clearly had advantages over other forms of data collection. As Sapsford and Abbott (1996a: 336-337) argue for example, quantitative research can often impose ‘its own conceptual schema on to the social world...designed to obtain answers to researchers’ questions; it does not yield an understanding of people’s lives in depth nor, generally, leave space for them to indicate what they regard as the important questions’. To gain understanding and extend knowledge about young people’s lives, an ethnographic approach combining innovative participatory and more traditional qualitative methods was deemed most appropriate in addressing the core research question and interrogating the underpinning primary objectives (James et al., 1998).

Research context

The overall objective of the research was to contribute to a contextualised understanding of the ways in which young people experienced policing, safety and security in their own localities. An ethnographic study was conducted in two coastal resorts, one in England and one in Wales, and access to young people was facilitated through centre-based youth organisations and outreach work¹ in the communities. The research participants were aged between 10 and 17 years old and the fieldwork extended over periods of six months in each locality (twelve months in total). Qualitative data was generated with young people in the youth organisations through a range of methods including: participant observation; semi-structured interviews; focus groups; photographic methods; group discussions with flip charts and other visual techniques. Additional qualitative data was also generated through unstructured interviews with young people ‘on the street’.

¹ Outreach work carried out by youth workers attempting to attract young people into a particular service or activity by delivering information to young people in public (Kaufman, 2001; Crimmins et al., 2004: 13-14).

Observing young people in their community habitus

Exploring and understanding young people's day-to-day experiences could not have been achieved without thorough observational methods. The observational methods illuminated appreciative understandings of the particular fieldwork localities; young people's perceptions and experiences; their engagements with each other, with local state agents/agencies and within their community habitus more generally. Blumer (1969: 39) claimed 'the task of scientific study is to lift the veils that cover the area of group life that one proposes to study...the veils are lifted by getting close to the area and by digging deep into it through careful study'. Blumer's emphasis on the importance of 'getting close' and 'digging deep' in the locality (and subsequently with the young people) formed a principal rationale of the research. Observing the localities and young people's movements, their interactions in and outside of youth organisations, and the young people's particular terms and modes of engagement within their community habitus/locales were underpinning objectives of the research. Observational methods have been applied in other studies with young people in public space (Pavis and Cunningham-Burley, 1999) including 'street' children in different countries (Vakaoti, 2009; Baker et al., 1996; Thomas and O'Kane, 1998; and Young and Barrett, 2001). The ability to record directly observations about the environment and behaviour of participants without having to resort to accounts offered by others has been suggested as being a great benefit (Foster, 1996). Participant observation also formed part of the relationship and rapport building with the young people.

Selection of appropriate methods: Planned and responsive approaches

When conducting empirical research, selecting the most suitable and appropriate tools 'to obtain valid and reliable data – true answers to questions, not distorted by the methods of collection' was of vital importance alongside a commitment to a human rights based conception of participation (Wilson, 1996: 98). During the 12 months of intensive fieldwork, complementary methods were also employed on a more opportunistic and/or naturalistic level. This accounted for the differences in each research setting. Youth organisations, where the majority of the data was collected, were very different in nature and purpose. However, activities including group discussions using flipcharts were regularly employed in both

organisations as a means of gaining young people’s viewpoints on a certain issue. Methods were therefore adapted to the activities that young people were used to engaging in. By doing so, additional information, meaning and understanding about the young people in each case study site were collected. Such adaptive responsiveness accords with the work of Beazley (2003: 183), who also collected ‘spontaneous drawings and mental maps drawn by the children’. The spontaneous participatory techniques, such as brainstorming, flip charts, and drawings all proved to be effective complementary methods of data collection. The young people were familiar with working in this way and, as such, I adopted this approach as an additional method of data collection. Writing questions on flip charts for the young people to answer with marker pens was a popular and well-used technique in both youth organisations. This was used as a standalone exercise on some evenings and were also included in the focus group sessions. A further separate method implemented was a participatory mapping exercise pertaining to safety and security in public space. I enlarged a map of the locality to A3 size and provided various coloured stickers and pens. I invited the young people to devise a code for the stickers and then place them on the map to represent places where they felt safe, places where they felt unsafe and places where they walked or visited. This method has been used effectively by others to explore young people’s understandings of space and place (see Kintrea et al., 2008; Reay and Lucey, 2000; Pain et al., 2000) and it uncovered young people’s perceptions and experiences of policing, safety and security in public space through a different method of communication. Using another participatory visual method such as ‘photovoice’ emphasised the fun and participatory nature that qualitative methods can offer. Photovoice, a concept developed initially by Wang & Burris (1994), is a participatory research strategy which enables participants to take photographs of places of significance in their community and then discuss these with a researcher. Employing visual methods in the research emphasised both the participatory imperative and allowed the research ‘to incorporate knowledge that is not accessible verbally’ (Pink, 2004: 361). This enhanced the participation of young people in the research and was significant in the rich and meaningful data that it produced.

This ‘gathering [of] unanticipated information’ (Sorhaindo and Feinstein, 2007: 7) presented itself weekly at the youth organisation when young people would sit down and draw or make things. Young people would draw posters for me representing their coastal resort or would ‘brainstorm’ on coloured paper with coloured pens ideas and themes that I suggested relevant to the research. These additional visual methods allowed for different forms of

communication that the young people felt most comfortable with (Christensen, 2004; Thomas and O’Kane, 1998) and similar to Punch (2002a) the visual aids also provided an opportunity on which to probe more in-depth information about the particular theme which was utilised in the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect in-depth rich narrative accounts of each young person’s experience and perceptions, and comprised vital data. They became useful ‘verification tools’ (Vakaoti, 2009: 444) and emphasised the complementary nature of the other methods used. Whilst this traditional qualitative method proved successful in its own right, this would not have sufficed on its own and felt to ‘traditional’ and ‘not as appealing’ as other methods which young people participated in. This flexible and responsive approach provided further insights into the young people’s perceptions and experiences. Adapting to the setting, using a triangulation of methods, and taking a reflexive approach therefore, benefited the overall research process I believe for researcher and participant. However, none of these methods could ever have been conducted successfully without the building and maintaining of rapport with the young people in each locality.

Building and maintaining trust with young people: Reflections from the field

The careful and deliberate effort to build and maintain a rapport with the young people was of the upmost importance in the research process. Young people were central to the research process and without their participation such research would not exist. The ethnographic nature of the research allowed me to spend quality time in each locality before data collection commenced. In both localities I did not conduct the interviews, photovoice exercise or focus groups until 4 months had passed. This time enabled me to spend quality time with the young people. Many days and evenings were spent in each youth organisation participating in the activities that they were used to. The majority of the time was spent listening. Through building up a good rapport and trust with the young people and, as far as possible, unobtrusively ‘blending’ in with their environment, the impact my presence might otherwise have had on distorting the data was mitigated. In order to ‘gain acceptance’ by those that I was researching (Heath et al., 2009:49) I tried to fit in and adopt a role which was a balance between observer and participant similar to that of Mandell’s (1991) ‘least adult’ role. If my role was to have been just an observer, my presence might have been questioned and thought

of to be ‘strange’ as in Pollard and Filer’s study (1996: 94). To some extent my role enabled me to view the social world the young people were part of through encountering ‘what they experience and do, individually and collectively, as they engage in their respective forms of living... the world of everyday experiences’ (Blumer, 1969: 35). By doing so I recognised how the presence of a researcher can impact upon the data collection and analysis. Threats to ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’, which Foster (1996:88) refers to as both ‘personal and procedural reactivity’, suggest how participants can act differently because they are aware of the researcher’s presence. By spending six months in each locality and not conducting methods until I felt a rapport was built with the young people went some way to ensuring this.

Over a period of months I would remind the young people of why I was there and that in the future I would ask them if they would like to participate in the research I was conducting. This was discussed over four months making sure that firstly, the young people were fully informed about the nature of the research and trusted me and secondly, when asking about the issues that impacted them on a daily basis, the narratives that I would be collecting would be a ‘truthful’ as possible. In acknowledging that ‘children are not only future members of society, they are active participants within society’ (Goldson, 1997: 27), the methods employed in this research gave voice to the young people and aimed to provide a greater understanding of their lives. By the time that I started the data collection I honestly believe that their experiences and perceptions entrusted to me were as close to the truth as one could get. Therefore, this paper advocates for time and dedication devoted to the building of rapport with young participants.

A researcher’s role: Self-reflection

Reflexivity allowed for the continual monitoring of my role throughout the research process, evaluating the extent to which my methods were reliable and valid, the optimisation of young people’s participation and the ethical integrity of the research. For these reasons triangulation was consistently applied in order to validate all sources of data collection alongside self-reflection. This is regarded as a ‘means of confirmation and as a way to provide information one data collection strategy might not have generated’ (Freeman and Mathison, 2009: 148). As Foster (1996: 91) suggests ‘if a researcher’s conclusion is supported by other data then we can be more confident of its validity’.

By spending six months in the youth organisations in each of the fieldwork sites, a potential risk of what has been commonly termed as 'going native' (O'Reilly, 2009: 87) was raised. This term, originating from Bronislaw Malinowski's ethnographic research in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), refers to 'the danger for ethnographers to become too involved in the community under study, thus losing objectivity and distance' (cited in O'Reilly, 2009: 87). It has been postulated that if a researcher identifies 'so closely with one's subjects that one inadvertently skews his [sic] description and analysis of the world being portrayed' (Monti, 1992: 325). By being reflexive throughout the duration of the fieldwork, I was careful to distinguish between my own interpretations and feelings that were recorded in my field notes, and data collected through interviews, visual techniques and each of the other methods of data collection. Writing a research journal every day provided 'emotional and mental distance' (O'Reilly, 2009: 116) from the participants and the settings. It was also a valuable reflective tool, where observations made in my journal provided additional verifications to the participant's narratives. Conducting research with young people, and building a rapport with them, does not necessarily mean that 'you have to turn native in order to argue from the native's point of view' as Geertz (1983) has contended (cited in James, 2001:254). The challenges for the ethnographer are to be aware of both the closeness and the distance that they have with their participants (Alvesson, 2003).

Being consistently reflexive throughout the process of data collection and data analysis, in particular reflecting on my role as a researcher, allowed me to overcome these concerns (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). As Delanty, (2005: 119) acknowledges, 'reflexivity is the key to the epistemology of the standpoint of the social actor'. Therefore, standpoint epistemology affirms that if a researcher has 'insider' status, they therefore have a privileged role over a researcher with 'outsider' status (Becker, 1963; O'Reilly, 2009; Heath et al., 2009). However, some reject the view that a researcher needs to share the same characteristics as those they are researching (Hollands, 2003; Nairn et al., 2005; Taft, 2007). I adopted a role that acknowledged the differences between the researcher and the researched (Mayall, 2000) even if my overall perspective was 'appreciative'. Even though I was older (aged 28 at the time of fieldwork) than the young people that participated in the research, it was not a vast age gap as can often be the case when conducting youth research (see Morris-Roberts, 2001; Armitage, 2012; Proweller, 1998). However, it did not give me 'insider status' as such (Heath et al., 2009). The young people at both case study sites thought that I was much younger than my age. Whether this may have benefited me in building rapport with the young people or

not is debatable. I believe it was the art of listening and maintaining ethical integrity that was of paramount importance (Pattman and Kehily, 2004; Frosh et al., 2002).

Leaving the field

After a period of intensive fieldwork, leaving each case study site was an important part of the research process. The ‘disengagement’ process (Snow, 1980) raises ethical and moral questions where the researcher finds themselves ‘confronted with a set of questions and issues concerning his/her indebtedness and moral obligations to those persons studied’ (Snow, 1980: 114) raising the fundamental question ‘do we ever leave the field?’ (Stebbins, 1991: 248). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) point out that most ethnographers retain acquaintances with those that they meet during fieldwork and ‘leaving the field’ does not necessarily mean that these relationships have to end. Recognising the emotional elements of the fieldwork process (O’Reilly, 2009) and the rapport that had been built over each six-month period, it was important that leaving the field was given careful consideration. In line with Lofland and Lofland’s (1995: 63) ‘etiquette of departures’, the young people at both case study sites were informed ahead of time when I would be leaving and the reasons why, and assurances were given that I would keep in touch. The successful rapport building that developed over time with the young people was for me the most important part of the research process and resulting from this has led me to feeling like I have not actually ‘left the field’. Since the end of the fieldwork, visits have been made on a regular basis to each locality and I still remain in contact with some of the young people through social media, email and telephone calls. After ‘physically leaving the field’ young people continue to update me on the progress they are making in their lives. For example, going to university, getting a job and becoming a parent. I feel deeply privileged to still be part of their lives. Engaging and the building of rapport with young people over an intense period of time I feel is a reflection of that. As a qualitative youth researcher, wanting to explore and gain meaningful insights into young people’s lives, I believe cannot be pursued in any other way. Precedence has to be given to the building and maintaining of trust which subsequently develops into a meaningful relationship between researcher and participant.

The case for ethnography and participatory methods with young people

By putting the voices of young people at the centre of the research, this study represents a challenge to the quantitative focus of much mainstream criminology and research that tends to be dominated by narrowly prescribed administrative agendas (Tombs and Whyte, 2004). The research discussed here produced data that was richly appreciative of young people's experiences and thereby reasserts the case for ethnographic approaches. Becker (1958: 657) points out that social scientists should not only strive to collect many instances of an identified phenomenon, but also seek to gather 'many kinds of evidence' to enhance the validity of a particular conclusion (Kusenbach, 2003: 7). Multiple methods were therefore employed in order to enhance the quality and validity of this research whilst emphasising the necessity of young people's participation in matters that affect them (UNCRC, Article 12 Right to Participation, ratified in 1991 by UK government). In recognising the importance of the 'new sociology of childhood' (James et al., 1998), which promotes young people's independent and active voice, the methodological design aimed to optimise the participation of young people in the research process.

Walters (2005: 95) argued that there has been 'a growing trend of nervousness surrounding criminologists who engage in ethnographic studies'. This research has demonstrated some of the reasons for this nervousness and has outlined and foregrounded the very real ethical dilemmas that researchers can face in 'getting up close' to young people. Risks included the prospect of 'going native' and the potential dangers that might be presented when entering marginalised communities as an unfamiliar researcher (Yates, 2004). Importantly, this research identified strategies which can be employed to successfully negotiate such issues and outlined how ethnographic research can be conducted in the current methodologically risk averse climate (Yates, 2004).

This paper has hoped to reassert the role that ethnography can play in exploring the lives of young people and advocates using a range of methods, both traditional and innovative, when conducting research with young people (Punch 2002b). In doing so, the ethnographic method pointed the analytical gaze into the lives of young people in coastal resorts and produced original knowledge regarding their experiences and perceptions they associated with policing and their conceptualisations of safety, and security in two very different contexts – one an excluded and marginalised context and the other a more affluent and 'successful' consumption space. The study incorporated young people's voices centrally into the research

and generated data that challenges common assumptions about young people’s use of public space in multiple ways.

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