The challenges of generating qualitative data with socially excluded young people.

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Address for correspondence:

Department of Sociology

School of Human Sciences

University of Surrey

Guildford, GU2 7XH.

Email: a.conolly@surrey.ac.uk

Tel: 01483 876983

Fax: 01483 689551

Author's bionote

Anna Conolly is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey. Her research is concerned with socially excluded young women, particularly those who have been excluded from secondary school.

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Abstract

Recent perspectives in childhood research have tended to emphasise the use of participatory techniques as a method of reducing the unequal power balance between researcher and researched. Increasingly researchers have been concerned with developing inclusive and participatory young people centred methodologies which place their voices at the centre of the research process. But is the ideal of young people's active involvement in the research process truly achievable or desirable with socially excluded young people in practice? This paper reflects on a range of ethical, methodological and practical issues arising from a study which tracks the lives of a group of young women who have been excluded from secondary school. The paper concludes with reflections on the necessity to overcome such difficulties for the production of in-depth data on some of the most vulnerable, socially excluded young people.

Background

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the ethical, methodological and practical issues resulting from a study which focused on the biographies of excluded girls. The study explored the girls' social, home and school careers (Humphrey 1993) and the identities they construct and perform in their everyday lives. Thirty-one young women aged between twelve and sixteen were involved in this research which was conducted at varying locations in England, some of which experienced high to very high levels of social deprivation (ONS 2005). The young women were excluded from school either for bad behaviour or truanting. Access was sought to the young women through Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), educational establishments for young people who have been excluded from school. Involving children as researchers in their own right, or 'active researchers' has been promoted by some (Kellett 2005b) in order to

generate data with young people. Instead, I advocate task-based activities as a practical way of promoting socially excluded young people's active involvement in the research process.

Social exclusion has been a key rhetorical focus of the current British government with the establishment in 1997 of the Social Exclusion Unit (Goodley and Clough 2004). Social exclusion is defined as:

> 'A shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown' (Social Exclusion Unit 2001: 10).

Although this definition of social exclusion and the term itself have been contested (for example see MacDonald and Marsh 2001; Colley 2003) it is not within the remit of this paper to reflect on these debates. The Labour government views young people who are excluded from school as socially excluded and asserts that they are likely to remain so for the rest of their lives. Although girls comprise around 20% of permanent exclusions from school in England and Wales (Department for Education and Skills 2003) school exclusion discourses appear to have a strong gender bias, rarely featuring girls. Osler et al (2002, 2003) are the foremost researchers to have focused on girls excluded from school. Their research concentrated on service providers' and the girls' own perceptions of school life and of the use of exclusion in its various forms, both official and unofficial. Their work can be described as innovative, however I argue that research into female exclusion could and should go further, focusing on social and familial factors, in order to understand their experiences in biographical contexts.

This paper provides an account of my journey from imagining data generation to undertaking fieldwork. In the first section I examine debates surrounding the use of participatory methods and then go on to consider those in the context of working with excluded girls. The second section concentrates on the potential obstacles to gaining access to excluded girls and the role gatekeepers can play in shaping the relationship between researcher and researched. The third section looks in detail at the use of the methods which I considered to be most ethically acceptable and worked successfully with my participants. The last section draws together the themes explored throughout the paper to indicate directions for good research practice with socially excluded young people.

Participatory research methods: a suitable method for excluded girls?

Debates concerning ethics and power are especially pertinent in relation to researching children and young people. Previous ethical debates have centred on the tendency to view young people as innocent and in need of protection (Harden et al 2000). Punch (2002a) recognised that young people are marginalized in adult-centred society; their lives are controlled and limited by adults, consequently they can be seen to experience unequal power relations. Traditional research techniques have been accused of emphasising the unequal power relationship between the adult researcher and young person as researched. Recently researchers have argued for children's competence as research participants to be recognised (Alderson 1995; Alderson and Morrow 2004).

During the last decade there has been a growing literature which has emphasised 'working with children as subjects not objects of research, listening to children, and respecting the rights of children' (Curtis et al 2004: 167). New 'methodologies of representation' have been developed to enable children to communicate through mediums such as drawing, photography or stories (Barker and Weller 2003; Christensen and James 2000; Thomas and O'Kane 1998). However,

such methods have been criticised for making the assumption that young people are not capable competent social actors. As Punch (2002a: 321) asserts 'If children are competent social actors, why are special "child-friendly" methods needed to communicate with them?'. Frazer (2004) has answered this question by asserting that child friendly methods are negotiated compromises that allow communication between the different conceptual outlooks of children and young people on the one hand, and those of researchers on the other. It should be noted that constructs such as 'children' and 'young people' tend to produce homogenised groups, but within these categories there are complex differences of age. In terms of working with these constituencies age is significant; approaches that are suitable for young children may be inappropriate or unacceptable to teenagers and vice versa (Hill 1997).

Participatory methods have been increasingly used over the last decade but the term seems to mean different things to different researchers. A review of the relevant research suggests some researchers allude to participatory methods as meaning child-based tasks and activities, whilst other advocates of participatory methods promote the 'employment' of children and young-people as co-researchers (Goodley and Clough 2004). Kellett (2005b) has highlighted the recent tendency for young people to be invited onto steering groups and involved in some aspects of data collection in a tokenistic manner. However, she emphasizes:

> '…the adult manipulation, unequal power-relations and the adult focus of such research. It is the adults who frame the research questions, choose the methods and control the analysis. For the most part, children are unequal partners' (Kellett 2005b: 5).

Kellett's (2004: 331) solution to this is 'going a step beyond involving children as participants to handing over the initiative and empowering them as active researchers'. She believes that

young people's competence is different from, not lesser than, adults' competence therefore asks why not teach young people research skills? (Kellett 2005b). Jones (2004) argues that involving children as researchers requires attention to six key processes: identification of barriers and boundaries, negotiation, planning and design, access, creating the work environment and reflection. Enlisting young people as co-researchers often involves a period of training for them in social research methods, followed by devising and designing a research project on a topic of their choice, delivering and disseminating the research 'entirely from their own perspective' (Kellett 2004: 329).

Programmes initiated by Kellett (2005b; 2005c) involved training selected children in research methods. Kellett (2005b: 11) recruited schools by stating the project 'would help meet some of the additional needs of able children, particularly in relation to the development of higher order thinking skills'. However, she does state that 'children as active researchers' is not exclusively for able children, 'all children who are sufficiently interested in undertaking their own research can be encouraged to do this by adjusting the level of support accordingly' (Kellett 2005b: 11). This raises questions about whether all children will be sufficiently able or interested. For the advocates of this method (Kellett 2004; 2005a; 2005b) participatory research is not participatory unless the young people themselves have a significant input at every level.

It can be argued that such a level of participation is not only impractical but can also be undesirable, particularly with excluded young people. I have identified a number of key problems with participatory research which tend to be somewhat glossed over. The first relates to agenda setting; if research was only carried out by children and young people who had chosen what to research then it can be argued that important issues may be under-researched simply because they are not interesting or they may not have occurred to the 'co-researchers'. Some agendas are not necessarily on children's horizons but they are still important.

An added complication is that without a great deal of training young people may not be very proficient at implementing Jones's (2004) model. In my own research time was to prove a key issue when dealing with young women at the PRUs. Most girls were scheduled to spend a few hours each day for up to four days a week at the units. To compound this, the girls' attendance was often erratic and even exclusions from the units were not uncommon. Therefore involving the girls in the planning of the research from an early stage would have been problematic. When applying for funding for my research the strict timetables and formats funding bodies adhere to became apparent to me. Research has to be conducted to an agreed budget and timetable from which there can be little deviation, therefore the nature of research funding can be seen to 'systematically preclude the involvement of young people' (Pole et al 1999: 47). The complex, transient nature of the pupils' lives at the PRUs also made involvement at every stage of the research process highly impractical.

My third problem with participatory research relates to the alleged reduction of power differentials between researcher and researched where young people are involved. Young people who are trained in, and asked to conduct, social research are being placed in an elevated position over other young people, in the same way as adult researchers who conduct research with young people. In the context of the present research giving some socially excluded young women authority to conduct research on others raises a plethora of ethical issues. The disclosure of sensitive data in a closed system such as the PRUs, where competing temptations, concerns and interests exist may have lead to exploitation and bullying. Many of the girls were either the victims or perpetrators of bullying and violence. Foucault (1980: 52) asserts that 'it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power'. Therefore knowledge is not dispassionate but rather an integral part of struggles over power and in producing knowledge one is also making a claim for power (Mills

2003). The potential for young people to misuse knowledge and power bestowed upon them in the research situation is real (Smith et al 2002). Knowledge could easily be transferred from the individual to the meta-level. I encountered the potential for such a situation when in one PRU I witnessed the abusive and violent disintegration of a friendship group when a rumour spread about the identity of one girl's sexual partner.

Fourthly, it could be argued that issues of informed consent and confidentiality are more precarious when research is carried out by young people. This is closely tied to the issues of power and knowledge discussed above. As Smith et al (2002) assert research methods, such as group interviews, routinely pose questions relating to confidentiality but this may be further complicated where the researcher and researched are part of the same social network. This was true of the units because they were small in size. In such situations children and young people may find it hard to say they do not wish to take part in research.

In the context of my research, I contend that engaging young people as co-researchers is at best unfeasible and at worst, somewhat unethical. The success of participatory methods depends on a certain level of commitment, (Leyshon 2002) sensitivity and confidentiality. It is not possible to make such assumptions for many excluded young women as their lives are often fragmented and transitory. The young women had often experienced considerable difficulties in their lives and working with them required a certain amount of sensitivity. Their experiences differ and it would be wrong to assume that simply because they share the categorisation of 'excluded from school' that they would have a shared understanding of all aspects of each others lives. Many of the young women had an anti-work ethic, therefore being seen to take an active interest in school work or research projects was not perceived by them to be 'cool'. Life for many of the girls, both at the PRUs and outside, was often characterised by conflict which sometimes escalated into violence. I believe it would have been unethical to ask

them to act as co-researchers both from the point of view of their own safety and those with whom they may have conducted research. Similar arguments could be made against involvement of excluded young people in the collective analysis of data. However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

Whilst participatory research was not feasible with my group of young people I still wished to enlist them in the co-production of data on an individual basis. I imagined an open and honest exchange with my participants, and I believed that this openness would give the girls scope to shape the nature of the research. I envisaged conducting some observational work with the young women followed by using different tasks in interview settings. I believed such activities would be a good way of facilitating discussion, building rapport and to some extent enable the young people to set the agenda. I wanted to approach the generation of data in a reflexive manner in order to critically examine my inter-subjective influences upon the research process and the production of data (Pink 2001). An emphasis has been placed on the necessity for researchers to:

> 'Reflect upon their own position and roles and evaluate their research in its attempts to achieve meaningful participation, rather than to simply adopt a tokenistic view of what the researcher perceives to be an appropriate method' (Barker and Weller 2003: 37).

The following discussion of my research will give an open and reflexive account of the challenges which I encountered.

Gaining access but losing control of the research?

I discovered that gaining access to girls who had been excluded from school was problematical; few of the young women used organised activities such as youth clubs.

Therefore my only viable option was to gain access through PRUs. I encountered my first challenge to the implementation of my open research approach at the first PRU I contacted. My planned strategy of conducting observation followed by interviews was discussed with the head-teacher who requested that I carry out covert observation whilst acting as a teaching assistant. She felt this would prevent the pupils from feeling uncomfortable and help me to build relationships with the pupils without them showing any hostility towards me. Her concerns arose from attendance problems that existed at the unit. She felt that the presence of a researcher, who some pupils might be inclined to view as yet another source of surveillance, might make them less likely to attend. I felt that her request for me to act covertly led to, what may be seen as, a competing ethics of practice.

As most researchers are aware, there are no 'absolute' doctrines of ethical conduct in social research. There are various sets of guidelines (for example the British Sociological Association or Social Research Association ethical guidelines) which researchers are advised to follow, but these are not without their critics (Alderson 2004). Some researchers argue that the key notions which these guidelines are built upon, of informed consent, confidentiality and avoidance of harm are at best problematic and, at worst, misguided (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). For example Hollway and Jefferson (2000) argue that researchers should not always strive to avoid harm as people may get upset in interviews but their distress may be cathartic to them in the long term. However, even though the dictums within ethical guidelines can be seen to have problems, they do also have benefits. For example although informed consent does not actually eliminate risks, it can be seen to give the subjects a degree of control over their participation and over perceived risks (Herrera 1999).

After careful consideration of the ethical implications and methodological difficulties involved I decided against undertaking covert research. Herrera (1999: 1) asserts that in fieldwork

'there is often only apparent separation between the honest, open study and the covert, or deceptive one'. My imagined research strategy which entailed an open and honest engagement with my research participants was directly at odds with the notion of covertness at any point in the process. I felt it would be deceptive of me to take on this role as I have no training as a teaching assistant. It would also have made my intention of conducting observation followed by interviews untenable, as the young women would have realised that they had been deceived, which could have made my situation very difficult. After outlining my problems with the proposed research strategy to the head I chose to withdraw from the first unit.

Gaining access again

I made contact with six other units in different regions of England and began my fieldwork by observing classes to understand the daily lives of the people in the units, but I encountered further ethical and practical problems. I was often taken into lessons which were already in progress with no opportunity to introduce myself to the staff and pupils or inform them about the research. I found that some of the staff at the PRUs did not have the same concerns regarding informed consent that I had.

I am not the only researcher to have experienced difficulties trying to adhere to ethical practice in a school setting. Morrow (1999: 212) comments that in all school based research there is an uneasy sense that because the research takes place in school and because of the agreement of their teachers and schools the research participants are to a large extent a 'captive sample'. Therefore it seems that because children:

> 'Are the "objects" of schooling, it is possible to argue that they are similarly the objects of the research. As other researchers have suggested, the "voluntary nature of any

> student participation in a school-based study may be doubted at a general level"'(Wallace et al 1994: 177 cited in Morrow: 1999: 212).

My experiences lead me to agree with this assertion. The observations enabled me to see the young women I would be coming into contact with later which helped me to develop some relevant participatory approaches. It could be argued that as pupils are often subject to other people, for example government inspectors, observing classes without their agreement there should be no problem with researchers taking a similar course of action. I do not argue that consent should be obtained in all cases of observation, as if this were to be the case then much ethnographic work would be impossible, but that observing was wrong in the context of my research. I wanted to be able to go on to build a rapport with my research participants and I felt that the awkward situations I was placed in during the observations might hinder my chances of achieving this during the interviews.

Another challenge I encountered with non-participant observation was the way I was positioned by staff at the units. The atmosphere and work ethic in the units were different from that of secondary schools in which I had previously conducted research. Many of the pupils in the PRUs exhibit challenging behaviour both towards members of staff and fellow pupils. Staff tried to encourage pupils to get involved in school work but it was often very difficult for them to teach without multiple disruptions. Pupils were frequently sent home during the course of the day due to their disruptive behaviour. Staff often commented that the pupils tended to do things with encouragement on their own terms rather than being told directly what to do.

After conducting several observations in two units in the South of England I came to the conclusion that non-participant observation as a research method was not working in the

context of my research. Each class had an average of six pupils, one teacher and one teaching assistant. This made non-participant observation difficult as the pupils would try to engage me in their rebellions against the teaching staff and the teachers would try to use me as an extra member of staff in order to maintain order. Other researchers have experienced similar problems when conducting research in a school setting (Burgess 1984; Griffiths 1995; Pole et al 1999). These competing desires for what my role should be made observation untenable. Therefore I decided to move on to interviewing the young women.

The reflexive co-construction of biographies through task-based interviews

Most gatekeepers asked me to obtain parental consent before speaking to the girls on a one-to-one basis. However, several of the young women complained that they were old enough for their consent to be adequate; they did not want their parents to be asked to provide consent. The Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA) asserts it 'has no fixed view about obtaining parental consent and believes the decision should be based on the competence of the young person to make an informed choice about participation' (TSA 2004: 2). Indeed, there is no legal obligation for the researcher to gain parental consent (France 2004) and as Masson (2000) observes in practice the final decision whether to gain parental consent is often left with the gatekeepers. At one PRU the gatekeeper decided that parents did not need to give consent and instead they were simply informed that the research was taking place. At another unit I was asked to telephone the young peoples' parents or carers in order to ascertain whether they were happy for their daughters to participate. I conducted interviews away from the domain of the teachers, often in a private counselling room in a one to one situation where I asked the young women to give their own consent. Information / consent leaflets were given out with the intention of providing the participants with 'bite-sized' pieces of information about the study and the interview process.

I rejected 'full' participatory research for the reasons already outlined but I still wanted the young women to have some ownership of the research process therefore I adopted what can be seen as 'the middle ground'. I decided to employ methods that would allow me to understand their lives and what was important to them, a technique I called the reflexive co-construction of biographies through task-based interviewing. I interviewed each girl individually and planned a range of task-based activities but gave each young person the choice of which of these they took part in and in which order. The task-based activities included drawing timelines which enabled the young women to represent the major biographical events that had occurred in their lives and social activity sheets which depicted the days of the week in order to give an indication of how the girls spent their time. Sentence completion tasks were also used which enabled participants to finish sentences such as:

When I am with my friends we spend our time …

When I am at home I feel …

I think I was excluded from school because of …

When I leave the PRU I want to …

Some of the young women also chose to draw family trees. These were particularly useful for those who had large or reconstituted families as this would often help me to understand which family members the girls referred to in their narratives. As will be discussed later, photo elicitation was also used.

Task-based methods are often used by social researchers to encourage young people to express their views and opinions on the topics raised in the research and also to foster a rapport between young people and the researcher (Harden et al 2000; Punch 2002b). I found these tasks also altered the power differential between researcher and researched as they enabled a two-way exchange of information. Before asking the young women to draw timelines or family trees I found that showing them my own family tree and a timeline of the major events

that have happened to me enabled a free exchange of information to take place. At the time of the fieldwork I was ten years older than many of the girls. I included details of my life up to the age of 18 such as attending a comprehensive school in a city setting, the divorce of my parents and my home burning down. The break-up of my family and my experiences of inner city schooling, which cannot be regarded as any way unusual in contemporary society, resonated with many of my interviewees and proved a useful starting point for our discussions. Foucault argues that power is exercised rather than possessed (Mills 2003) and this exchange of knowledge seemed to set things off on a more equal footing. Although revealing information about myself may have made the young women present themselves to me a certain way, I would not have felt able to ask in-depth, sensitive questions about their lives without first revealing something about my own life. I am not the first researcher to have adopted an approach such as this; Oakley (1981) has documented the collaborative approach she developed with her interviewees in her study about women becoming mothers. I am not advocating that such an open approach is always possible or indeed necessary, but in the case of these socially excluded young women my willingness to disclose information about myself seemed to lead to free and easy discussions.

The activities I employed during the interviews stimulated the production of a great deal of rich data. Out of the thirty-one young women interviewed only three stated that they could not draw a timeline because nothing had happened in their lives. However they did draw family trees which served as a starting point for the interview. I found the young women's visual representations of their lives very useful as it enabled them to clearly express their experiences, feelings and relationships. The narratives of this socially excluded group frequently illustrated the complex and transient nature of their lives, such as not having a permanent home often instead sleeping on friends' and distant relatives' floors.

Although most girls seemed keen to participate in all aspects of the research and became engaged in the process, this was not always the case. Two girls I approached stated that they did not want to be interviewed. However, in a further two cases it became clear that after having initially agreed, the participants did not wish to be interviewed. One girl, whilst walking with me to the designated interview room, had an argument with a teacher and then hit a pupil. When we got to the room the girl was obviously still agitated and found it hard to concentrate. In another interview it became clear that the interviewee was not engaged and she soon requested to return to her lesson. I gave these girls the opportunity to be interviewed at a later stage but they declined. Overall the young women I came into contact with were very keen to participate. I believe this was in part due to my assurances of confidentially and the rapport I was able to build with each girl. I feel that such data would not have been obtainable if a 'full' participatory approach had been adopted.

The next stage of the research, photo elicitation, involved giving single-use camera to each young woman who wanted one at the end of her interview. I asked these girls to take photos of things that were important to them, such as places and people. 'Photo elicitation' has become increasingly popular as a research method to be used with young people (Barker and Weller 2003; Orellena 1999; Morrow 2001; Young and Barrett 2001). Previous research (for example Morrow 2001) has indicated that such methods produce an abundance of rich data providing insights into the importance of social relationships and locale in participants' daily lives.

When the cameras were returned to me I had two copies of the film processed; a copy for my research purposes and a copy for each photographer. In a follow up session I gave the young women their pack of photos unopened and I asked them to write a couple of sentences on the back of each photo about why it had been taken. I tape-recorded these sessions as I found the girls would often talk at length about the relevance the places or people depicted in the photos

had to them. As Barker and Weller (2003) and Orellena (1999) have noted it is vital for researchers to ascertain children's own reasons for taking photographs, rather than giving their own 'adultist' interpretation and assumptions to the pictures.

The young women were competent at using the single use cameras. A problem arose from the fact that many of the young women spend their time in the evenings outside with their friends in parks or on housing estates. Consequently some of the photos were taken in almost complete darkness and even though the cameras did have flashes, some of the pictures could not be seen clearly. On average from a film of twenty-four pictures, five would fail to turn out. The young women were disappointed when this happened but understood that the disposable cameras were quite basic.

Photo elicitation enabled the generation of data which may have been otherwise unobtainable. It is suggested that the use of photographs helps to frame and focus the discussion, sharpen the memory, evoke rich descriptions and set the informant at ease (Alexander et al 2005). The young women were able to construct a multi-media framed identity through their own selection of what they represented back. Choosing the subject matter of the photos and being able to discard photos gave the girls some control over the research process. I found that because the camera activity was perceived to be 'fun' (Barker and Weller 2003; Young and Barrett 2001) many of the girls became excited about participating and this seemed to result in them being interested and engaged in the research. Collection of the cameras did prove problematic in some instances, as many of the girls were often absent from the units. Some of the units were a long way from my home (in some cases a few hundred miles) and it was hard to arrange my visits around possible times when the girls might have been attending.

Informed consent was gained from the young women in relation to the dissemination of their photos. They were also cautioned to ask permission before taking photos of people to ensure that the individuals pictured were aware they would be used as part of a research project. Where researchers have used photo elicitation methods with young people some have decided that such pictures should not be displayed publicly (for example in published work) since there is no way of gaining informed consent from those depicted (Barker and Weller 2003). To overcome this problem a copy of each film was put onto CD ROM which enabled me to pixelate individuals' faces thereby preserving anonymity.

After the photo sorting sessions participants were given a £10 voucher for a shop of their choice. These were given in recognition of the time the young women spent on the research (Alderson and Morrow 2004). The payment of research participants is sometimes looked down upon as a means of inducement which undermines the free choice of a person to participate in research (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). However, there seems to be increasing recognition that offering participants a 'thank you' for taking part in research is acceptable, particularly if such payments are not given as an incentive to participate (Roker 2005; Smith et al 2002). To avoid this I offered payment after participants had agreed to take part in the research. The young women were left with information leaflets with my contact details in case they wished to discuss any issues in more depth.

Conclusion

In this paper I have reflected upon the challenges that I encountered in my fieldwork researching a group of socially excluded young women. I have argued that enlisting excluded young women as co-researchers would not have been practically achievable due to their transient lives and sometimes disaffected outlooks nor would it have been ethically desirable. Advocates of participatory methods may not concur with this assertion. Others, however, (for

example Pole et al 1999) have noted the importance of recognising the limits of young people's agency and acknowledging the constraints under which it is realised. The researcher is in a privileged position and should accept the responsibility of safeguarding the young people they work with. I realise that this may have limited the young women's control over the research process but in order to counteract this I took great care to foster a reciprocal approach in the methods I did use.

The first gatekeeper's request for me to do covert research could have endangered the integrity of the research. Choice of methods should be dictated by researchers' ontological and epistemological stance not by gatekeepers. It should be more widely acknowledged that it is hard for researchers to stand up to gatekeepers to ensure research is always conducted in the most desirable and appropriate manner, as they can be key to the research's success or failure. I encountered competing ethical perspectives at the PRUs. However I found the research was conducted with greatest success at units which allowed me a certain autonomy to speak to the girls in an environment without interference. I found that a quiet space could be created away from the formality of the institution which allowed for the active participation of the young women in the co-production of their biographies.

I have advocated task-based activities as a practical way of promoting socially excluded young people's active involvement in the research process. These activities were a key feature in providing a basis for the excluded young women to relate the stories of their lives. The collaborative nature of the research hopefully enabled the fusing of my agenda, as the researcher, with the agendas of the participants. The camera activity approximated a fuller participatory approach as it allowed the young women to pursue their own agenda, collect their own data and then to analytically reflect on their data in the photo sorting session. I believe that the photos enabled the girls to communicate their lived experiences and locale in a way

words cannot easily express. The use of varying data generation tasks allowed the girls to construct a multi-media framed identity reflecting the way the young people live their lives; in a variety of differing contexts and locales.

I would argue for the need for the researcher to be reflexive throughout the whole research process. I believe that such an approach enabled me to react appropriately to the challenges I encountered resulting in the generation of rich data with a group of socially excluded young women. Rather than an objective process, data is produced and collected through inter-subjectivity between researcher, respondent and other significant individuals and institutions (Pink 2001). Researchers have argued that power relations can never be overcome but must be constantly analysed and made visible through reflexive discussion (Barker and Weller 2003). It is a truism that reflexivity itself is partial as the complete impact of the researcher upon the research process can never entirely be identified, but the researcher should always endeavor to be aware of the pitfalls involved in failing to be reflexive throughout their research.

I conclude by asserting that participatory research methods have their place but we should not come to view them as a panacea or a dogma when undertaking research with young people. Regardless of which methodologies are used it is imperative that questions of epistemology should be engaged in and addressed. As a method of reflecting the lived realities of a group of socially excluded young people I found that task-based approaches proved to be engaging and fun and facilitated the generation of a large amount of in-depth data.

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