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Participation, positionality and power. Critical moments in research with service-engaged youth

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Abstract

This chapter discusses three particular challenges that occurred in qualitative research with young women who have school before finishing upper secondary school. The three challenges concern participation – on behalf of the potential research participants as well as the researcher. I approach these situations as critical moments; critical for my understanding of and engagement in the research. More specifically, I address challenges related to recruitment, to researcher positionality and to managing relationships in the field. I demonstrate how encounters such as the ones described call for reflection to foster greater insight into the research process – what went well and what went wrong, and why did it go wrong – and ultimately ensure ethical research practices. I argue that these reflections must not be left as such but have to be treated as part of the data and therefore integrated into the data analysis.

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss practical and ethical challenges and complexities arising in relation to research *participation*, on part of (potential) research participants as well as the researcher participation, when conducting empirical, qualitative research with young people. Empirically, I draw on the recruitment challenges in the first phases of an ongoing, longitudinal qualitative research project about the everyday lives and imagined futures of young women in Victoria, Australia, who have left school before finishing Year 12 (upper secondary school) or otherwise have had their transitional pathways interrupted. The project is designed as an interview-based project that focuses on the young women's everyday lives and imagined futures as these evolve over time. Through reflection and discussion of specific experiences from this project, this chapter focuses on three particular aspects of research participation with the aim of illustrating the complex dynamics of this.

The research project focuses on young women on the margins of the educational system and/or the labour market, and not those already in more marginalised positions such as in drug treatment or criminal justice programmes. While the boundary between these categories is often fluid, I deliberately focused my recruitment strategy on the former. Hence, to get in touch with potential participants, I decided to go through work/training-focused service providers to have some form of institutional setting in which to meet participants. I made contact and set up collaborations with selected service providers on the fringes of Melbourne and in regional Victoria. After gaining access to these settings I then 'hung out' in the spaces of the service providers – such as offices and communal spaces – to meet the young people there and introduce the project to them. While the research project as such is an interview-based study, I took ethnographic fieldnotes of my observations and interactions with staff and young people during this initial phase of the project, and these fieldnotes form the empirical basis for this chapter.

Targeting service-engaged youth in this way is not without challenges. While the ethical and practical challenges I will touch upon in this chapter are not confined to this population, they are of particular salience here. Scholars have argued that service-engaged youth is an 'over-surveilled' population (Renold et al. 2008) and that research easily becomes "an act of

objectification of an already objectified group" (Aaltonen 2017:331). In particular, in relation to my focus on 'early school-leavers', Vogt argues that this is a group that may already feel stigmatised and targeted (Vogt 2018), because leaving school early is perceived as problematic given the strong discursive focus on education as the means to success. These issues have practical implications. As Renold and colleagues argue, common interview approaches asking participants to respond to questions such as 'how do you feel about that' or 'what do you think about that' mirror traditional social work (or other kinds of youth work) techniques or the 'social work gaze' (Renold et al. 2008:432). This can easily make the interview situation feel like 'yet another' of those meetings with system representatives scrutinizing their lives, and this may facilitate a repetition of the kinds of narratives that are told in such settings; narratives that often are necessary for gaining access to particular services (Farrugia 2016). A key challenge is therefore to avoid this by making participants interested in participating and also making them agentic subjects rather than passive research objects.

While I have collaborated with a handful of different service providers to recruit the participants in the study, in this chapter I focus on one particular setting where I spent the greatest amount of time. This is a service-provider based on the outskirts of Melbourne, Australia, which supports young people at risk of homelessness with a particular focus on supporting their educational engagement. However, the challenges are not confined to this setting. The chapter is structured around three situations from the initial fieldwork. These three situations are chosen as they shed light on particular concerns central to this project (and most likely to many others) and can be seen as what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) term 'ethically important moments'; moments that are "the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research" (2004, p. 262). Here, however, I prefer to approach them from a broader perspective, focusing not solely on research ethics – although this is a central part of these – but seeking to relate these ethical issues to broader questions about fostering participation and constructive researcher-researched relationships. Hence, I approach the three situations as 'critical moments' (Thomson et al. 2002). While this is a concept that is usually used in biographical and/or longitudinal research to focus on "an event described in an interview that either the researcher or the interviewee sees as having important consequences for their lives and

identities" (ibid., p. 339), I here use it to refer to events that I see as having important consequences or being of central significance for the research process. The critical moments that I identify in this chapter are thus moments that caused reflection, doubt and hesitation on my part but eventually also fostered deeper insights into the research process. The first critical moment concerns recruitment and participation, the second concerns researcher positionality in the field, and the third concerns the management of relations with participants and reflections on how to leave the field again. All names and places are pseudonyms.

Becoming participant: "I don't feel like talking about myself right now"

> *I am sitting in the communal areas of the [institution] and some of the young people are going to and from the room. I am looking for one young woman, Bibiana, whom the staff has told me might be interested in the project. I met her briefly the other day with some others and gave her one of my recruitment flyers. Back then she sounded vaguely interested, but I'm not sure if she was just being polite. She has not been in touch since then so I am keen to follow up. Bibiana comes in together with two other young women. She often seems to be at the centre of attention. They are busy chatting about something that happened in the shopping centre. I get a chance to talk to Bibiana on her own as the others go outside to smoke a cigarette and I ask her if she has had time to look at the flyer. She says she has been busy and not had time to read it but will read it. I start explaining what the flyer says and say that what I am basically asking is if she is interested in doing an interview where I ask her about her everyday life and her dreams for the future. Bibiana then looks at me and says she is not interested: "I don't feel like talking about myself right now" and she goes outside to the others to smoke. I am the only person left in the room and the disappointment is overwhelming (October 30 2017).*

Bibiana's response, as frustrating as it was for me in the situation, holds significant information about her own current situation as well as broader recruitment challenges. It

also emphasises how choosing *not* to participate in research is, as McGarry writes, also "a means of self-expression" (McGarry 2016:343). While I can only second-guess as to the reasons for why Bibiana did not want to talk about herself at the time being, reflecting on this 'critical moment' is important for understanding the conditions under which participants take part in the project. Farrugia argues that broader social and symbolic hierarchies are unavoidably reflected in the interview/research encounter. In his case, this meant that participating in a study on youth homelessness involved being positioned as 'homeless youth' (Farrugia 2016). With this in mind, I considered how to frame the current project in a way that would not necessarily position participants in questionable or stigmatised subject positions such as 'early school leavers' or 'people on benefits'; positions that are commonly problematised in public and policy discourse. However, despite presenting the research as about young women's everyday lives and dreams for the future, I cannot avoid the fact that I am recruiting from service providers targeting young people outside education or employment and that potential participants may still assume the research to ask critically into this, expect readymade plans etc. This could be what made Bibiana refuse to participate; that she perceived the interview within the service provision setup and did not want to be 'the servile subject', who willingly speaks about her current and future plans.

In light of such reflections it seems fitting to consider the question the other way around: rather than asking why young people (and others) do not want to participate in our research, we should consider what *does* make some people give up their time and participate (see also Ravn 2012)? What *has* made the 31 women who to date have participated in the first wave of interviews decide to do this? Lohmeyer (2018) suggests thinking of the research encounter as consisting of parallel projects, meaning that alongside the researcher's project there is the project, or the motivations, that the participant brings to the encounter. These can take numerous shapes. Farrugia argues that the interview presents an opportunity to show that one is a 'morally worthy person' (2016) while Järvinen (2001:280) uses the term 'moral tales' to refer to such accounts of oneself. This relates back to the point about framing above; if participants feel they are often labelled – by the media, by parents, by professionals etc. – as questionable subjects this may make them want to speak against such labels. Such accounts were without doubt part of the present study, but

not the whole story. Others were curious about the research project and wanted to be part of that. And finally, most participants indicated that they participated for altruistic reasons, either simply to help me with my research as a friendly gesture, or because they hoped the research would help others in their situation. This is maybe the dominant reason for why people participate in research in their free time (Seymour 2012) and emphasises the importance of making clear what the purposes of the research are and what the research findings may be used for.

All participants are given a $30 voucher after each interview as a recognition of their time and efforts. While this is a debated practice (see Seymour 2012 and Chapter XX in this volume for a detailed discussion of this), I did this to emphasise that I approached them respectfully as busy people who are ultimately doing me a favour and as such as an 'exchange' . The voucher was mentioned in the 'Details' section at the bottom of the flyer and in the plain language statement to participants, but some still seemed surprised when I gave them the voucher, revealing that they might not have read or remembered every section in detail. In general, the voucher did not seem to be the decisive factor for their participation and none of the participants mentioned the voucher themselves, before or after the interviews. However, given the financial constraints of many participants – few had regular jobs or a secure income and many struggled with finances – the $30 appeared a welcome contribution to their budgets. Therefore, even if the voucher *was* part of their decision to participate, I do not find this problematic as long as they engage with the interview questions – which they all did.

The actual research design can be more or less inviting for potential participants. Although not set up as participatory research – where participants are actively involved in a varying number of steps along a continuum from study design to dissemination of findings (Mannay 2016) – the study includes a number of creative methods such as emotional maps, life charts and photo voice which are sometimes described as participatory methods. Despite differences between them, both approaches share the ambition of giving 'voice' to young people and seek to alter the power relation between researcher and researched (Mannay 2016, see also Section X in this book for chapters discussing the notion of 'voice'). However, creative or participatory methods are not a quick fix. McGarry argues that participatory

approaches have become the "new paradigm of youth research" (McGarry 2016, p. 339) or a new "orthodoxy" (ibid., p. 340) in research on young people. While these approaches can be valuable, their use is often too unreflected, she argues (McGarry 2016). The problem rests in claims that participatory methods give 'voice' to the research participants and hence are depicted as producing more 'authentic' and 'true' findings. However, this is too simplistic, especially if applied within an overall constructivist approach to empirical research, where the methods we use inherently shape our findings. In the present study, the motivation for incorporating these methods are different. Instead, I employ these to break away from the 'standard' interview (Bagnoli 2009) in an attempt to further distinguish the research interviews from interviews with professionals and service providers. Creative methods have also been described as a way of 'making the familiar strange' (Mannay 2010, 2016), for instance by asking research participants to draw something as familiar and taken for granted as a party (Ravn and Duff 2015)[i]. This can be helpful in research on taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life, but also can be a way of breaking away from repetitions of the already well-known narratives that are useful in the service provision setting. The young women who have participated in interviews so far have been keen to take up different tasks, for instance mapping their neighbourhood on a sheet of paper, and the initial impression is that at least for some of them, these aspects of the research are part of the interest in the project.

Positionality and privilege: 'So where are you going?'

> *Today was my last day here [in the service provider space] before the Xmas holidays, and I wanted to say happy holidays to the people I have come to 'know'. I did not run into all the girls but managed to find a few and also some of the staff and tell them that I will be away until late January. I have been pondering how to approach this as I have come to realise how most of them have not travelled much, if ever, in their lives, and this in sharp contrast to my privileged, academic life where I travel internationally for either conferences or holiday at least once and often twice a year. But I thought it was important to not just 'disappear' for a month, so my strategy was to say I would be 'on leave'*

> *rather than telling them that I am travelling. It seemed to work ok – except when I was chatting to Tommy in the kitchen. I asked him what he was doing and he said he would be spending Xmas at [the institution] and that he might go and see an uncle later on. He did not have plans for January either. He then asked into my plans and what I would do while on leave and I felt the awkwardness surround us as I quietly said I was going to New Zealand*. (December 21, 2017)

As part of the relational work involved in ethnographic fieldwork I wanted to make sure I did not just 'disappear' as I was going on annual leave and hence would be taking a longer break from the fieldwork site. The young man in the quote, Tommy, was one of the young men that I had the most interaction with during the fieldwork phase, either chatting or playing basketball together. However, as the quote illustrates, this conversation created an awkward moment for me as it emphasised the social distance between us when it became clear that I was in a position to travel to other countries while he was barely leaving the institution. While I do not know if Tommy also felt this distance or reflected on my position, it underscored that I entered the field as a white, middle-class woman employed at a university, with all the symbolic messages this position entails and the distance those can create. First of all, I could be seen as someone who represents the educational system and also as an individual who presumably never had 'school fatigue' but pursued education for as long as possible. This is important to have in mind as this may position me (cf. Davies and Harré 1990; Harré and Langenhove 1999) as the 'ideal' (former) student in relation to participants who for the most part have had their transitional pathways through the educational system interrupted, for some involving negative experiences in school and with the school system as such. Second, my university affiliation also indicated a well-paid job with the associated economic privileges such as travelling on holiday; privileges which none of my research participants had. I feared that these differences, which made me not just a clear 'outsider' (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995) but also put me in a superior position in the social hierarchy in relation to the participants could be a hindrance for their interest in the project and later for establishing rapport in interviews.

It was important for me to try and downplay these aspects of my identity to not enhance the distance between us and to be able to establish rapport and generally seem relatable

and approachable. I did this in different ways. One way concerned my outfit; I deliberately dressed more casually than my usual work clothes (see also Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). This was my attempt at countering what I assumed potential participants might associate with a 'researcher', i.e., someone formal and boring. Another way concerned interaction and informal chats. Discussions often touched on money and finances; participants having too little money to participate in activities they wanted, or considerations about what to buy and not buy when going grocery shopping to make money last. I tried to not present myself as 'carefree' in relation to money and would for instance contribute to stories about saving money, such as buying in bulk or waiting for something to come on sale. However, as the excerpt above made clear I could not hide or ignore my privileged position – and doing so would not only be pretentious but also ethically fraught. Rather, the purpose of these efforts was to interact with participants in a respectful way; a way that did not make for instance financial struggles seem embarrassing. There is a difference between *acknowledging* one's privilege and *displaying* one's privilege and I sought to avoid displaying my privilege without pretending that I shared social positions with my participants.

Despite the potential challenges that emanate from differences in social position, the opposite scenario – sharing social positions – is not necessarily better. In their article about 'class matching' in research on social class, Mellor and colleagues (2014) argue against the assumption that a correspondence between the class background of researcher and participant, respectively, automatically creates greater empathy and rapport in the interview situation. Rather, they illustrate how the social background of the researcher often works in unpredictable ways, sometimes productively and other times less so. This was also the case in the present study. Hence, a key part of introducing myself and the study to participants was to frame this as focusing on 'how it is to grow up as a young woman in today's Australia', i.e., implicitly positioning myself as outsider both in terms of origin and generation. The former position, an 'outsider' to Australian society, was easily accepted and became an unforeseen benefit in the research: as a Dane who had only moved to Melbourne two years before commencing fieldwork I often had to ask clarifying questions about particular aspects of the social and educational systems, acronyms etc. and I did not know local geographies in much detail. This ignorance and naivety seemingly

helped in distancing myself from being a 'system representative' and allowed me to ask 'silly' questions (se also Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). The latter position, on the other hand, being from a different generation, was sometimes challenged. Some participants would ask 'what do you mean, you are not that old', indicating that things could not have changed much and I should know about this experience. In those situations, being a woman in my thirties gave me some leeway in terms of building rapport through a sense of shared understanding as 'young(-ish) women'. In that sense, my position vis-à-vis the participants was complex, involving both my relative privilege that could create difference and distance, as well as shared gender identities (at least with my interview participants, not necessarily all the young people I met such as Tommy above) that could serve to decrease such distances. In that sense, traditional ethnographic roles such as 'insider' or 'outsider' were not as clear-cut and while I would be perceived as an outsider in most respects, at times I would inhabit more of an insider position, thereby complicating this distinction between such stable roles (see also Merriam et al. 2001).

Managing researcher-researched relationships: 'I bet you did not expect to be doing this with your PhD'

> *When I arrive to [the institution] Louisa [one of the young people there] is hanging out in the office area and seems bored. It appears that she is waiting for her exam results to be released later in the day. She is also waiting to meet with her mentor later on. Louisa is nervous and checks her phone constantly for the result, but still seems fairly confident that she will do OK. To kill time, she decides to do a bit of gardening in the communal garden beds. After some weeding she needs help filling new potting mix into the beds and asks for my help to do this. Louisa dryly says "I bet you did not expect to be doing this with you PhD". We both laugh out loud and I am short of any pointy remark. Later when we are in the communal room she receives a text message with the result: she has passed one subject and failed another. Her disappointment is visible and she starts to cry. I don't know what to do with myself apart from saying that I am very sorry. I*

want to give her a hug but it does not feel appropriate. A staff member comes over and takes over the conversation and I feel superfluous (November 3 3017).

Louisa is one of the participants I met early on in the research and she quickly said yes to participating in an interview. I would often meet her when doing field work and she was a 'regular' in the communal areas of the institution. In the first interview it became clear that her social network is quite limited, both in terms of friends and people to 'lean on' if necessary. This, combined with Louisa's great willingness to participate in the research and chat to me when 'hanging out' there, made me slightly cautious and I had to carefully balance this relation. On the one hand I did not want to give her the impression that I was a new 'support person' or potentially even 'friend' in her life as I felt this might pose a conflict of interest and involve expectations that I could not meet (Bengtsson & Mølholt 2016). On the other hand, I was aware that the relation between us was based on some form of exchange – participants giving their time and thoughts in interviews and the need for giving something back, apart from answering the questions about myself they would ask me and the voucher as discussed above. Hence, on a couple of occasions, my 'field day' turned into more of a one-on-one study session, assisting with school assignments.

My concerns about the perceived nature of the relation between me as researcher and Louisa as participant were momentarily put to rest when encountering the situation described in the field note extract above. Here Louisa included me as her 'assistant' in the garden work she was doing, thereby circumventing the power relations implicit in the researcher-researched relation. I interpret her use of sarcasm and explicit mentioning of my PhD degree as her way of showing her awareness of the unequal relation between us, as given by the research context. Critical social research has investigated how humour is not innocent and that humour used by professionals (e.g., social workers) can be counter-productive given the unequal power relations (see, e.g., Andersen 2015; Mik-Meyer 2007). However, in this example it is not the 'authority person' (the researcher) who uses humour, but the participant. Coser writes about humour that 'Laughter and humour are indeed like an invitation, be it an invitation for dinner, or an invitation to start a conversation: it aims at decreasing social distance' (Coser 1959, p. 172 in Mik-Meyer 2007) and humour is said to have 'a disorganizing effect' on power relations and authority (Mik-Meyer 2007, p. 15).

Hence, when Louisa uses humour sarcastically to direct attention to the 'unconventional' situation she can be seen as both challenging the power relation and attempting to bridge it, decreasing the distance between us. While this works well and makes us both laugh, it is easy to imagine how this might not have been the case if the joke was presented by me.

However, as the end of the excerpt above demonstrates, the challenges in managing the relationship returned as Louisa received her marks and reacted to these. I wanted to maintain the professional relation between us and not breach personal boundaries, while at the same time feeling sorry for her and wanting to comfort her. Had the staff member not interrupted the situation I might have had to reconsider my approach, for instance by asking if she wanted a hug or sitting down to talk through the consequences. As Bengtsson and Mølholt write, "To become part of the lives of young people in vulnerable life situations is a great responsibility. As researchers, we gain valuable knowledge when following young people through time but we also necessarily become involved in the young informants' lives and build up a relationship with them" (Bengtsson and Mølholt 2016, p. 13). While this relationship is a professional one, it may at times require the researcher to simply be a fellow human who shows compassion or support. Balancing this is an ongoing challenge that requires a situated ethical approach, and the situation described above was critical for becoming aware of these challenges.

Discussion: 'reflexivity' and then?

Turner and Almack (2017) have referred to the process of starting up a research project as a matter of "grinding a complex machine into action' (p. 488), and suggest that this is a matter of making 'wheels within wheels' work together in the recruitment process, each wheel representing a specific, interpersonal relationship (ibid.). Expanding this metaphor beyond recruitment, interpersonal relationships are critical to the entire research endeavour and as the highlighted moments above indicate, the researcher is as much a wheel in the process; a highly critical wheel in terms of how the research develops.

Participation in research raises a number of challenges, as the three critical moments presented above illustrate. While the issue of participant participation is often given the

most attention, not least during the often-times frustrating and difficult process of recruitment, what the researcher brings into their participation is equally central. But on which terms do we – researchers and researched – participate in the research process? In the sections above I discussed how assumptions about and perceptions of the research(er) play into decisions about participating in the research or not, and into researcher-researched interactions in the field. I also emphasised the need for acknowledging and reflecting on the social positions we each inhabit and how these affect the research process as well as the data (not to mention the data that *is* the research process, (cf. Bengtsson 2014). However, while such reflexivity seems to be constantly called for, engaging in this is not straightforward. Indeed, Gillian Rose has argued that such a transparency and self-knowledge is impossible: 'there is no clear landscape of social positions to be charted by an all-seeing analyst; neither is there a conscious agent, whether researcher or researched, simply waiting to be reflected in a research process' (Rose 1997:316). Instead, drawing on performative and feminist identity theorist such as Judith Butler, Rose suggests to view the research process as a site for the performance of identities, both on part of the researcher and the researched, as neither 'remains unchanged through the research encounter' (ibid., p. 315). Taking this forward, rather than attempting the impossible, i.e. to 'predict' the research encounter and the positionalities involved in this *beforehand*, when planning the research, we should consider the identities performed in particular research encounters – both by researchers and researched – in hindsight and include this in our analyses.

The challenges discussed in this chapter may be more pronounced because of the longitudinal design of the study. For instance, it adds an additional level of complexity to the process of recruitment and seeking informed consent as a central part of this. Participants were told about the follow-up interviews and that the researcher would be getting back to them a number of times over the following two years before agreeing to the first interview (in the plain language statement) but I emphasised that they only consented to one interview at a time (ongoing or processual consent). The longitudinal nature of the research may have turned off some potential participants, while for others this was appealing. And while managing the relationship with participants is arguably a challenge in all qualitative research, this challenge becomes more pronounced when this relationship is continued over time. While the relationship is critical for the success of the longitudinal design, it is also

tricky as it is more likely to come to resemble other types of relationships such as friendship or mentoring (Thomson and Holland 2003, Bengtsson and Mølholt 2016).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed three particular challenges related to conducting qualitative research with service-engaged young people. All three challenges concern participation – on behalf of the potential research participants as well as the researcher. Based on three specific incidents that became critical for my understanding of and engagement in my own research I have addressed challenges related to recruitment, to researcher positionality and to managing relationships in the field. I have demonstrated how encounters such as the ones described call for reflection to foster greater insight into the research process – what went well and what went wrong, and why did it go wrong – and ultimately ensure ethical research practices. This is critical for all research. It may be even more critical when the social distance between researcher and participants is significant or when engaging with people in vulnerable positions, where there is an additional layer of ethical challenges to navigate. However, as I argued in the Discussion section above, drawing on Rose's argument, the task does not stop here. Taking these challenges seriously is not simply a matter of establishing rapport and developing 'good' relationships in the field; it is about acknowledging, reflecting on and *analysing* the performative aspects of the research; how the power dynamics that are part of all relationships shape the research. This means that we do not just leave such reflections to the methods section of our texts but include this into the process of analysing and interpreting the resulting data.

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[i] In my doctoral research on youth recreational drug use I developed a maptask to produce data on hard-to-access spaces such as small-scale private house parties. Participants were given a piece of paper and asked to first draw the floorplan of the house/apartment where the party was held and then to insert arrows to indicate how they moved between different parts of the house as the party progressed. For more detail, see Ravn & Duff 2015.