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Harris, C., Jackson, L., Mayblin, L. et al. (2 more authors) (2014) 'Big Brother welcomes you': exploring innovative methods for research with children and young people outside of the home and school environments. *Qualitative Research*. Published online before print September 22, 2014. ISSN 1468-7941

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114548947>

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Harris, C., Jackson, L., Mayblin, L., Piekut, A. and Valentine, G. (2014) “Big Brother welcomes you”: exploring innovative methods for research with children and young people outside of the home and school environments, *Qualitative Research*.

Abstract

This paper discusses some of the challenges involved in conducting research with children and young people outside of the home and school environments. We respond to the need to develop new child-centred research techniques which move beyond existing power relations among children and adults by anchoring our approach in the idea of mystery. The paper reports on research utilising a mixed-method design which includes one new technique – the Big Brother diary room. We discuss the unpredictable nature of the fieldwork, reflect on the ‘messiness’ of the research process, and critically evaluate our own research design.

Keywords: mixed-methods; children-centred research; children and young people; reflexivity

Big Brother welcomes you”: exploring innovative methods for research with children and young people outside of the home and school environments

Research with children

In the 1990s, researchers who worked with children moved away from ‘traditional’, ‘adultist’ research methods, such as one-to-one semi-structured interviews, and towards ‘child centred’ approaches (see Mauthner, 1997; Hall and Ryan, 2011). These child friendly methods were based on children’s preferred methods of communication, for example drawing, photography, stories, and song (Barker and Weller, 2003a). Such methods were part of an attempt to be more respectful of children, approaching them as competent participants rather than underdeveloped communicators (Valentine, 1999; Darbyshire et al. 2005; Skelton, 2008). The focus for social scientists working with children has, since this time, tended to be on empowering children and young people, breaking down the researcher-participant power relation and increasing their knowledge and understanding of the research process with a view to expanding the possibilities for consent.

There is an increasing interest in involving children and young people in the research process which has been influenced by the recognition of children's rights and by the reconceptualization of children within the social sciences as active agents rather than as passive objects of research (Kirk, 2007). Children need to feel an active part of the research, knowing why they are involved and to what ends. Therefore, Darbyshire et al. (2005) focused their approach on letting the children lead the research, allowing them to choose how to facilitate focus groups. Others have gone to even greater lengths, seeking to involve children in the whole process from research design to dissemination (Alderson, 2000; Warming, 2006; Holland et al., 2010).

While scholars often recommend that children should be more than 'subjects' of study, suggesting that they should participate in the whole project, many researchers find when they enter the field that sustaining, or even initiating, the involvement of children can be very difficult in practice (cf. Cree et al. 2002). Barriers to involving and empowering children can include a lack of interest in the research on the part of participants, lack of time, limitations imposed by gatekeepers, and restrictions determined by the research context. While children are at school most days, research in extra-curricular settings such as youth clubs, which children attend voluntarily and sporadically, with leaders who usually work voluntarily and deliver provision on limited resources, can be very challenging in terms of stimulating long term engagement (Askins and Pain, 2011). As Barker and Weller (2003b) therefore point out, the spatial context in which research is undertaken with children can have significant implications for the quality of the data, as well as on the agency of those involved. Though this does of course apply to adults as well, the fact that children's lives are largely controlled by adults, and are based mostly in school and at home, means that these contexts and the power relations within them, are important to bear in mind when entering the field (Valentine, 1999). Though simplifying children's agency in respect to the presence of adults,

Kellett (2011) implies that a politics of location is especially important when conducting research with children.

This turn to child-centredness has more commonly led researchers to use, and create, research tools which will make the process of participation fun for children and young people. There can, however, be drawbacks to using ‘fun’ methods, and, as Punch (2002a: 323) points out “such techniques should not unquestionably be assumed to be more appropriate for conducting research with children”. Furthermore, experienced scholars continue to urge others to be reflexive in the successes and failures of their research design, and to be open in research publications about what does not, as well as what does work (Darbyshire et al., 2005; Skelton, 2008; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). In this paper we take up the call for researchers to have a greater willingness to report reflexively on the messy and unpredictable nature of qualitative research with children, and to critically evaluate the success (or otherwise) of our own research design (Darbyshire et al., 2005). We also contribute to the literatures on spatial context, by moving beyond the school and the home, to a third context which is inhabited by children – an extracurricular activity club in which the territorial authority of the space resides with those being researched. In the case of such spaces, issues such as the politics of access, of consent, and of power relations, take a different character to the more commonly researched school and home settings. Indeed, the challenges involved led us to develop an innovative research method which does not attempt long-term engagement.

This paper draws on material from a large multi-staged research project funded by the European Research Council. The [name anonymised] project explores the extent and nature of ‘meaningful encounters’ with ‘difference’, by collecting original data in a British city. The initial stages of research, conducted through a survey and qualitative methods, revealed three key sites for creating meaningful contact: the workplace, educational spaces and leisure

spaces (Authors, 2014). To explore the importance of these spaces we conducted research into meaningful encounters within them. In the case of leisure spaces, we developed links with a community centre in a city in the north of England – an interfaith youth project for young Christians, Jews and Muslims which brings young people of different cultures and religions together to break down ethnic stereotypes, encourage friendships across religious groups and build a feeling of community. The aim of this was not to evaluate the success of this youth project, but to observe and learn about what enables and disables the creation of meaningful encounters amongst young people.

“Big Brother Welcomes You”

Knowing that the organisers of the voluntary project with which we were working did not have the capacity to facilitate engagement over a long time period, that the young people in their project changed, and that they had recently scaled down from weekly to monthly meetings, meant that the possibilities for engaging participants in the research process over a long period of time were very limited. In response to these circumstances, we needed a research design that could provide a one-off, fun evening for participants, which also garnered quality research data. Our research is concerned with encounters across difference and we were interested in the extent to which these young people of different faith backgrounds had experienced ‘meaningful’ contact through the project, contact which had challenged their previous views and broken down prejudices or preconceptions (Valentine, 2008). We also wanted to explore an innovative research method which would challenge some of the now established assumptions about working with children as research participants – that power differentials are always bad, that honesty, openness and understanding should be at the heart of the research process (as opposed to mystery and purposeful concealment), and that children necessarily need to be involved at every stage of a

research project for it to be successful. In short, we wanted to use child-centred methods in that the experience of taking part was fun for participants, which would play on children's tendency to become excited about mystery.

Our idea was based on the Big Brother diary room concept, originally popularised as part of the British based Channel 4 reality TV series which later became an international phenomenon. A 'diary room' would be set up, with a hidden voice asking questions and a camera placed in full view in front of the participant. Within this context, mystery and concealment would be an essential part of the research process, which we believed would be exciting for participants. In pilot work with this youth group we had found focus groups and interviews to be unsuccessful. As Punch (2002a: 325) has observed, "children are not used to expressing their views freely or being taken seriously by adults because of their position in adult-dominated society. The challenge is how best to enable children to express their views to an adult researcher". This led us to speculate whether both the breaking down and reinforcement of the research-participant power dynamic – removing the 'teacherly' adult and replacing them with a mystery voice – would allow young people to speak more freely. Here we also considered issues of body language, tone of voice and response to questions, and ratio of participant to researcher (Kellett, 2011). After considering these issues in terms of their ethical dilemmas and associations of power, the Big Brother diary room offered an innovative way to engage with young people on a more level playing field and with the understanding that being aware of, and sensitive to, particular dimensions of power would enable a more effective and suitable research method (Kellett, 2011). Further, in exploring this we followed Punch's (2002a) suggestion that researchers should engage in critical reflection in analysing different types of data. As part of this exercise we embedded the Big Brother activity in a mixed method research design including standard face-to-face interviews with a researcher, drawing, a 'secret box', and participant observation. The mix of techniques

was designed to both offer opportunities for evaluating our innovative method within the context of established approaches and to offer variety to engage young people's interest and produce maximum data from a single research event (cf. Ajodhia-Andrews and Berman, 2009).

The drawing element involved a table with pens, pencils and a selection of both directed worksheets which offered opportunities to draw or write answers to questions such as 'meeting other faiths is good/bad because' or drawing 'me and my friends at [club name]', as well as blank paper which allowed the young people to contribute anything they chose. A researcher sat at the table and spoke with the young people to introduce the task, but did not monitor what was being done. As the young people could choose what activities they took part in within the research setting they drifted in and out of this activity, most, however, did choose to draw or write something. Secondly, we used a 'secret box' (Punch, 2002a). This involved placing a box in a visible location where participants could post their written thoughts and drawings privately. This approach can further empower children to take part as they feel that their secret is safe from others present. Another researcher undertook participant observation through the whole session and directed volunteers to the interview room.

A third researcher undertook traditional one-to-one semi-structured interviews as a primer to the Big Brother diary room. This offered the opportunity to gain formal written consent, for the young people to ask questions privately, and for comparative data to be gathered between the diary room and the standard interview. The interview was recorded and took the style of a chat about the children's lives outside of the project (their age, faith, where they live, who with etc.) and then the extent of their engagement with the project as well as their experiences of taking part in interfaith activities. When in the Big Brother diary room participants were

asked to sit in front of black sheeting facing a video camera (see fig. 1). They were left there and once the door closed, a fourth researcher, who played the part of Big Brother (sat behind the black sheeting), welcomed them and introduced the fact that they would be asked a series of questions but that there were no wrong answers.

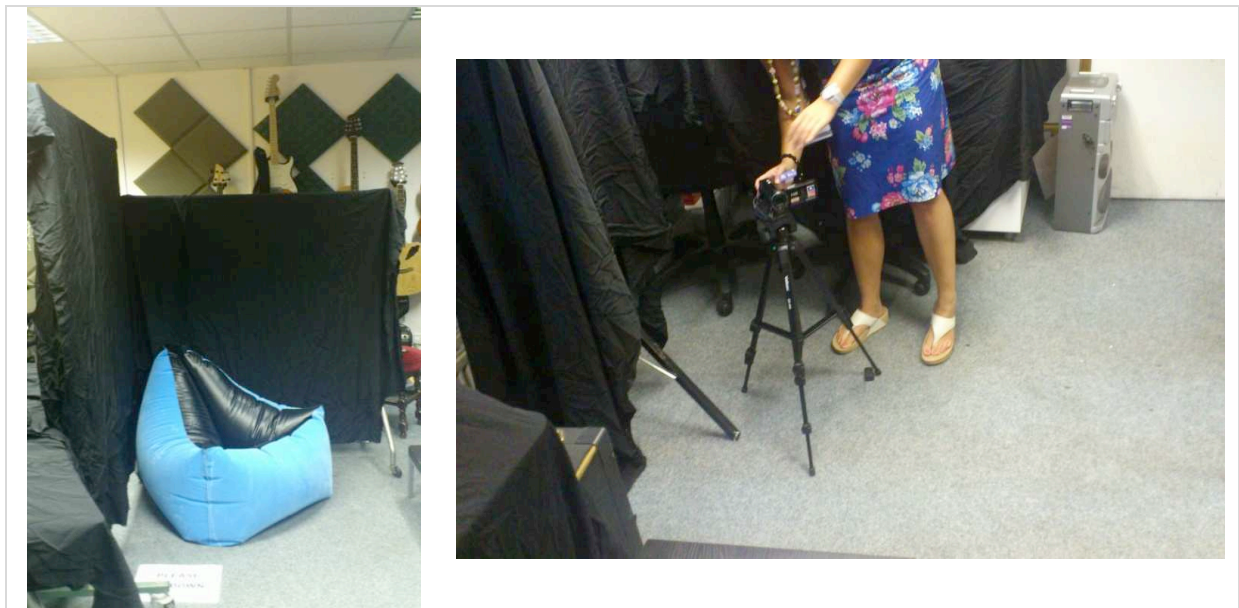


Figure 1. Constructing the ‘Diary Room’ (Source: Author’s own).

We had hoped to follow the ideal model of obtaining both parental and child consent, through ‘opt-in’ (Valentine, 1999). However, as other researchers have found (Morrow, 2008), compromise sometimes becomes necessary in the field as gatekeepers can feel that it is their right to determine what level of consent from parents is necessary. Indeed, some argue that this is their prerogative and should be respected (Skelton, 2008). In practice, then, meeting high ethical standards is not always possible. Though we had access to all of the children, we had no means of contacting parents, and such access was not made available to us. We urged the organisers of the youth project to pass consent forms to parents, but only one of the three believed this to be necessary. As it became clear that certain organisers deemed parental

consent unnecessary and would therefore present a barrier to obtaining it, we focussed on participant consent, believing that ultimately we need to respect children's decisions and place the focus on their autonomy and decision making capacity to engage (or not) with research (Valentine, 1999; Skelton, 2008). This decision facilitated the research, ensuring autonomy and agency for the young people rather than with an external other controlling their decision-making capacity. In this sense, participants offered their involvement voluntarily, rather than through coercion. The incentive for taking part was to discuss their experience at the inter-faith youth project and to give us ideas of what they would like to do in the future (Nuggehalli, 2014).

Obtaining participant consent involved explaining to the group in advance what would be happening and making it clear that only those who wanted to should take part, followed by a one-to-one chat prior to going into the initial standard interview, and then another explanation and check, followed by the signing of consent forms before the interview taking place. Whilst it is difficult for researchers to anticipate the ethical dilemmas which will arise during the course of the research, we took Morrow's (2008) lead in seeing ethics as "situational and responsive" (p. 52), and sought to overcome potential problems in the field. Using a range of methods also enabled the young people to choose how to express themselves and which activities to opt in to, again highlighting the voluntary capacity of the exercise. It is important to state that the young people were made well aware of what the research would involve. Though they knew that Big Brother would be asking them questions, it was the precise nature of the 'diary room' (what it would look like, who Big Brother was) which was used to create mystery, increasing excitement and interest. However, knowing that 'Big Brother' would be acting in such a manner also served to reinforce particular power relations, especially regarding researcher authority. We felt that children would be receptive to Big Brother as a way of expressing their views freely to an 'adult' researcher that was unknown, unseen and

mysterious (Punch, 2002b). Moreover, Big Brother did not have any prior knowledge about affairs in the activity club, which differs considerably from the reality TV figure.

Over a three hour session in which 25 young people were present, 15 people contributed drawings or pieces of writing, whilst 11 people were interviewed and went through the diary room. This left us with over 2 hours of Big Brother video diary recordings, 2 drawings and 23 written contributions, 3 hours of participant observation (plus 6 hours previously gathered), and 1.5 hours of interview recordings. Participants were male and female and ranged from 10-16 years of age. They were mixed Jewish, Christian and Muslim, and were from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and residential areas within the city in which the project is located. Interviews and diary room data were transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed using qualitative data software.

Reflections on the research design

In this section we reflect on our mixed-method research design before discussing the innovative Big Brother method in more detail. As such, we want to present the uniqueness of the undertaken methodology in relation to the multiplicity of epistemological pathways that could be chosen (cf. Elwood, 2010; Jackson, 2011). Knowing the right approach is often a challenge for researchers, but many researchers who work with children advocate a mixed-method approach (cf. Darbyshire et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the way in which methods are brought together within different research projects varies according to both the context and the research questions under consideration (Jackson, 2011). Structuring our research to incorporate the number of considerations detailed above resulted in numerous positive dimensions which may be attributed to the introduction of innovative techniques for working with children and young people.

The approach taken here created a new experience for the children involved and ensured a high level of excitement and enthusiasm. Many participants were particularly interested in the 'novel' method of the Big Brother diary room, over and above more familiar activities, such as drawing, with only two generic pieces being produced. The variety of activities available to participants allowed us to better reflect and represent the diversity of the group with which we were conducting the research. Other studies involving children of different age groups, 4-11 and 13-16, have shown that a multi-method approach helps to embrace diversity of children's experiences and competencies (Barker and Weller, 2003b). The group was from different backgrounds, of different ages, and had multiple interests; using mixed methods, therefore, meant that individuals could participate in a way that suited them. We anticipated that quieter children could write their perspectives down for the secret box or could sketch their ideas, whilst those who were more confident were able to talk to Big Brother or to the researchers directly. However, it later turned out that the 'diary room' was also preferred by more shy children who felt that they could share more sensitive thoughts there. This approach meant that we were able to work effectively with the limited time allotted to the research and enabled us to ensure voluntary participation (Kellett, 2011).

A single method approach, such as interviewing, might alienate some individuals who do not have the confidence to talk to 'adults', while drawing exercises can facilitate the expression of thoughts and ideas which are difficult to communicate in words (Kellett, 2011; Tolia-Kelly, 2007; Hemming, 2008). In this context the drawing exercise garnered mixed results. Not all participants in our research became involved in the sketching exercise, which may have been due to the presence of gatekeepers or due to the age of the children present (Punch 2002a). A few younger participants were happy to be involved in sketching exercises and sat at the table with paper and drawing materials. However, older children tended to focus on other activities, with some taking part in Big Brother, whilst others continued their normal

practices at the youth centre. One older participant (female, 16) was particularly concerned with her artistic abilities, becoming more frustrated at getting her drawing 'right'. After discarding several attempts she decided not to submit her sketch for fear that it was not the 'right answer', instead talking to Big Brother. The lack of enthusiasm for the sketching exercise might also be associated with the number of activities on offer for the children in this space (Kellett, 2011) or that some of the implemented method did not fit the culture of communication of the space (Barker, Weller 2003b). The data collection was therefore challenged by the presence of multi-sensory activities that were present at the same time as well as the 'ownership' of this space which rested with the young people present rather than being adult-centred.

The secret box proved popular, with a number of children writing their thoughts down and dropping them into the box. However, we found upon opening the box that many of the responses towed the 'tagline' of the organisation and felt this did not accurately reflect what the children felt about working with others from different backgrounds. For example, participants wrote such things as "*speaking to people of different faiths is good because you get to learn and spend time with different people and cultures*", while in the interviews they expressed other opinions. Further, many of the provided answers were quite similar, including phrases such as "it is fun", "you learn" and "new activities", indicating that children repeated the club objectives that they heard from adult coordinators of the space. This suggests that this task perhaps too closely resembled school work, leading the young people to submit what they felt were the 'right answers'. The short semi-structured interviews that were conducted before the children entered the Big Brother diary room gave a good insight into the children's views, with few participants appearing uncomfortable speaking with an adult. The participant observation provided interesting contextual information. Observing the 'active performance' of identities and relationships here enabled the researchers to gain

further perspective on how the group's leaders facilitated contact between different groups and therefore allowed us to analyse the operational practices of the group (Whatmore, 2003).

The importance of spatial context must also be considered (Valentine, 1999; Barker and Weller, 2003b; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). As previously discussed, the space in which the research was conducted was one in which the children and young people have more agency than at school, and one clearly characterised by different dynamics than the home. They had freedom in their choice of activity within the space, and though the space was familiar to them, it was not a part of their everyday life. Conducting research in this environment meant that concerns regarding uneven power relations between researcher and participant were decreased. In this setting, the young people were to some extent 'in charge', with group leaders largely sitting back and watching the scene unfold. The young people present were under no obligation to take part in the research, participating in other activities if preferred. The activity space therefore remained the young people's, with the research team controlling only a small portion of the space for Big Brother, as well as putting some tables together at one side of the room (see fig. 2). Such freedom and agency around issues of participation thereby ensured that the space was not dominated by the researchers (Nuggehalli, 2014). The young people were bound only by the (fluid) rules in place by the youth centre with which they were already familiar and comfortable. The choice to conduct the research in such a setting was deliberate one made by the research team to offer flexibility, reflexivity, and the control of the space to be led by the young people, thus developing their decision making capacity; as such, the space was convenient for both researcher and participant, and enabled us to deconstruct particular ethical dilemmas (Kellett, 2011).

The presence of gatekeepers in the room where the drawing activity and secret box were located had both positive and negative implications. Though organisers attempted to help us

‘facilitate’ the research, their presence also had a negative effect. Whilst adopting an ‘opt-in’ principle for the children, facilitators often felt the need to ‘persuade’ some to get involved. This might be seen as undermining the ethical groundwork which we had explained to the children. Further, the gatekeepers’ presence at the sketching table might also have impacted upon participation levels (Woodcock et al., 2009). The informality of the research context did, however, facilitate more relaxed interaction between gatekeepers, researchers and participants.

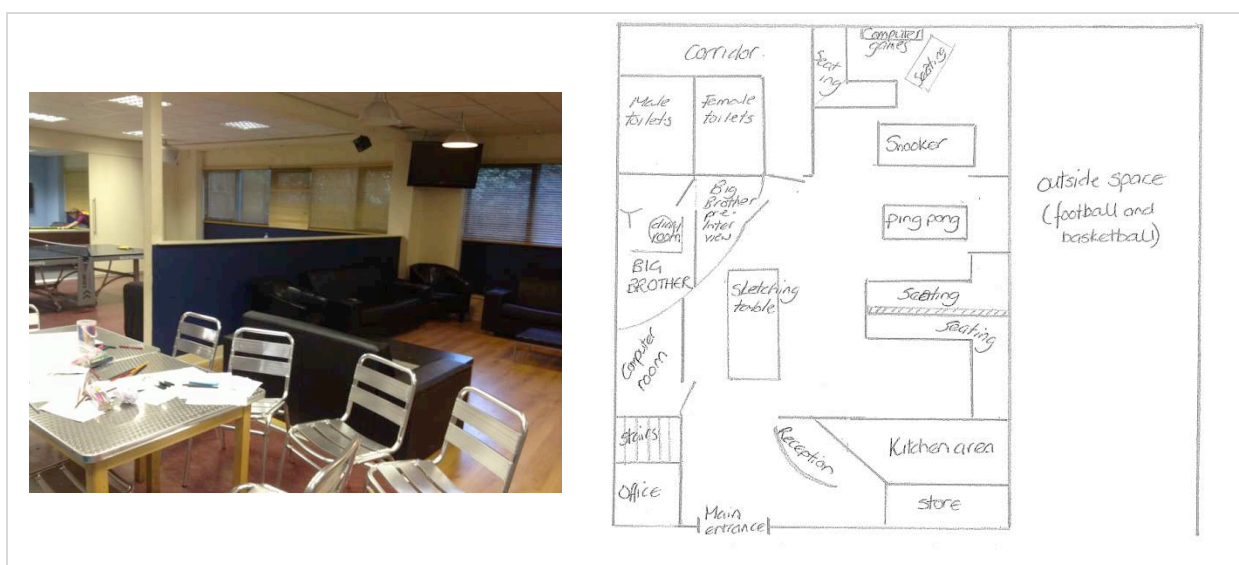


Figure 2. Spatial layout of activities/ the youth centre (Source: Author’s own).

Though the activity took place in a setting to some extent ‘owned’ by the young people, this had its own limitations in terms of impact upon our data collection strategy. With so many activities to choose from, a number of individuals decided not to participate, preferring to play computer games, football or snooker. Whilst our ‘visit’ was the central focus of the evening, for some of the children present this was their first visit to this particular space. The novelty in activities available therefore became a distraction. Though facilitators attempted to raise interest in the activities being offered, participants focused more on social mixing (the central aim of the youth project). Here, participant observation proved to be the most

effective data collection method allowing us to understand the broader dynamics of the group at work.

Maintaining the interest of individuals in a chaotic space is subsequently a key issue and demonstrates the way in which control of this type of space is led by participants rather than researchers; interest was fleeting and reflected not only the attention span of individuals but was also impacted by noise, movement, discussion with others and the *sociability* of the space. Whilst some individuals actively participated in the different tasks, others did not and therefore a more structured research environment, which responds to the needs and strengths of children's encounters, might facilitate more engaged and detailed material. A more structured (and individual) approach may bring order to the 'chaos' of conducting research in 'children's spaces'. The Big Brother diary room was therefore utilised to engage the children present in an environment in which 'traditional' power relations between child-adult were somewhat disrupted (Kellett, 2011).

In sum, utilising a mixed-method research design facilitated the collection of in-depth, detailed data that went beyond description and re-presentation of participants. However, whilst innovative (visual) methodologies can counter the traditional power dynamics of other methods (Holliday, 2000), our attempts to shift the power relations and mix up the different approaches did not always work well in this particular context. The time involved with the group has a direct impact on the data collected. Other researchers, documenting methodological challenges of working with children (Cree et al., 2002), discuss the challenge of stimulating long-term engagement from younger participants. However, short interactive sessions might come with their own challenges. Whilst a sustained period of research with the group may have allowed for further reflection on the part of the researchers, the exercise that took place contained a degree of novelty (and mystery) for those involved, thereby

allowing the space to be somewhat transformed. Additional time, however, would have allowed for further participation of all individuals present at the group and would have ensured that other activities available might not be in such direct competition with the activities designed by the researchers.

Reflections on the ‘Big Brother’ method

Whilst using appropriate methods is of concern for all researchers, there is great enthusiasm within children’s research to develop and use fun ‘child-friendly’ methods. This was in part the impetus for the research team when developing the Big Brother method. The team wanted to create a method that the children would find exciting and would allow them to express their views. This presented some interesting methodological issues both in terms of the data collected, and from the perspective of the researcher acting as Big Brother. Here, we reflect on the use of the Big Brother method, moving between the first-hand experience of the researcher acting as Big Brother and more general reflections on the Big Brother method shared by the team and participants.

A great deal of adaptability was required during the interviews. The children were asked by Big Brother to select an envelope with a question in for them to answer from a choice in front of them. Many of the envelopes contained questions regarding neighbourhoods in the city, asking the children to describe what these areas were like. These questions were included because we had been informed by the youth club leaders that each of the faith groups (residing in different parts of the city) had strong preconceptions about the areas in which the others lived. After the first few interviews, however, it became apparent that the children were not familiar with the names of other areas within the city, with many questioning “what’s that?” when asked to describe a particular neighbourhood. Though video data revealed that all participants enjoyed this activity initially, they were disappointed when they

did not know how to answer the question. During the interview Big Brother could hear them sigh with disappointment and the video data revealed some of the participants to be rolling their eyes and shrugging their shoulders in frustration. In order to overcome this problem, Big Brother ascertained which envelopes contained general questions which they felt all children would be able to answer. However, it took several interviews in order to rectify this problem. This highlights the issue of being reliant on adult gatekeepers (Woodcok et al., 2009) who provided the information on which such questions were based.

The researcher portraying Big Brother was unaware of who was to be interviewed and had no preconceived ideas of who interviewees would be (having not seen the children entering the youth centre); this makes the research Big Brother figure less authoritative than the TV version who 'is watching you'. As the child entered the room to begin the interview, Big Brother did not know their name, gender, age or religion. This was asked during the interview in order to target some of the questions appropriately. However, Big Brother was still unaware of the appearance of the child.

During the interviews I could not see the children. Once they told me their name and age I created a picture in my mind of how they looked. However, I became increasingly aware how difficult it was to conduct an interview without being able to make eye contact or use body language to read the situation. I had to use quite simplistic language whilst being expressive and articulate because I could not use gestures and eye contact to help me explain questions or build a rapport with the child. I found this particularly difficult when respondents were talking about sensitive or upsetting matters. One female respondent described how she did not have many friends and often felt left out at the youth project. I found this had a strong effect on my emotions which was emphasised by not being able to see her or reassure her through body language and eye contact [reflections from Big Brother].

McDowell (1992: 405) argues that feminist methodologies see the researcher becoming involved with the researched and that their mutual emotions and experiences may connect them. Whereas Phoenix (1994) and Mullings (1999) describe the way in which biographical moments within the research process create connections. Therefore, according to Jackson (2011: 49) “the researcher becomes part of the research; they are not only immersed within the research but their own emotions, connection and experiences become an active part of the research”. This enables the researcher to become closer to the narrative of the research, with the data that is gathered becoming more entangled with daily life. In this case, the emotions of the researcher were enhanced by the unseen nature of the interview.

The Big Brother method had some interesting implications for power relations. On the one hand, I felt in a position of power as I was the one asking the questions. On the other hand, I felt as though I actually had no power. The pressure of having one chance to conduct the interviews made me feel that the children and the gatekeepers were in control. Also, because I could not see the children I was interviewing I felt that they had more power than me. I was concerned that some of the children might peep behind the screen to catch a glimpse of Big Brother, therefore ruining the method. In a way this rendered me powerless [reflections from Big Brother].

As discussed throughout the paper, issues of power are critical when conducting research with children and young people. Children may be particularly intimidated by adults when conducting interviews. Many authors have drawn attention to the need for researchers “to make more effort to find other [more innovative] ways in which children can communicate their experiences” (Valentine, 1999: 149). The Big Brother method goes some way to reduce the power imbalance between child and researcher. Though the children seemed to recognise Big Brother as an authority figure and it could be assumed that the researcher was in charge of the space of the diary room, the fact that neither the researcher nor participant could see

each other to some extent equalised such power differentials. This was demonstrated in the types of information that participants revealed during this stage of the research. This was also explained by the reflections from Big Brother who described being bound by the knowledge and participatory attitude of the participant, being in a space where the territorial authority resided with those being researched and feeling disempowered due to not being able to respond to the participants' body language.

After the interviews had been conducted I watched the videos of the interviews in order to reflect on the methodology and analyse the data collected. This was the first time that I had seen any of the respondents. On watching the interviews I realised that some of the children looked much older than I had imagined. I also became aware that I had used a similar tone of voice for all of the interviews. If I had been conducting the interviews face-to-face I would have modified my tone of voice according to the appearance and age of the child. For some of the older children my tone of voice appeared as though it was aimed at someone of a younger age. This may have seemed patronizing or gained more limited results as I was using a more simplistic tone. I was also aware of what I missed during the interviews by not being able to see any body language. When questions were asked where children were struggling they would often start looking at the ceiling or fidgeting. If I could have seen these non-verbal indicators I would have been able to adapt the questions or help them, but I was often unaware that they may have found some questions difficult to answer [reflections from Big Brother].

Fargas-Malet et al. (2010) suggest that it is very important when interviewing children for the researcher to use non-verbal behaviours. Since this could not be used in the Big Brother method it is important to consider what limitations this may have had on the data collection process. As this pilot of the Big Brother method was part of a multi-method case study, the data collection as a whole can be considered rather than solely the results of the Big Brother

interviews, which goes some way to mitigating this limitation. However, such a limitation could be overcome with the use of more sophisticated technological equipment. A screen showing the participant to Big Brother, for example, would have overcome such issues, though again this would have unbalanced the power relations in favour of the researcher, rather than the participant.

Despite these limitations, children were more eager to share in-depth and sensitive information in the Big Brother room than through other activities. Whilst children contributed notes to the secret box stating that they have fun with other children in the club, learn about other cultures, religion and engage in new activities. In the diary room some became more open about their negative experiences, such as group exclusion or lack of interaction with children of other faiths. When the adult-researcher was 'hidden' behind the curtain and acted as a 'faceless' Big Brother, it could be more easily revealed that the objectives of the youth group are not always met:

Facilitator: So when you're at [club name] do the different religions mix together, do you think?

Interviewee: Nowadays, yeah.

Facilitator: When didn't they mix together?

Interviewee: Like quite a few months ago.

Facilitator: Why do you think that was?

Interviewee: I don't know but... because there was all the Muslims and us and we kind of just didn't get along.

Facilitator: Do you know why you didn't get along?

Interviewee: Not really, because I'd only just - it was kind of new to me and stuff.

Facilitator: So why do you think that changed? So people mixed together now, why do you think that is?

Interviewee: Well they're not here anymore.

Facilitator: Right, so who's here now?

Interviewee: The younger Muslims and the Jews.

Facilitator: They're easier to mix with?

Interviewee: Yeah.

When the group of children were asked who would like to take part in an interview with Big Brother they were all very enthusiastic with their hands being raised, demonstrating their eagerness to participate. Were we to have asked them if they would like to take part in a standard interview it is unlikely that they would have shown such enthusiasm. This atmosphere was both felt by the researcher and the research participants.

During the interviews the children all seemed excited to talk to Big Brother. They recounted stories and spoke to me like a friend. There was a rapport between us with some of them assuming I knew their friendship groups. One of them asked: "You know my friend Jack don't you?" Perhaps because I was unseen to them, I sensed that they felt as though they could open up to me and tell me about their experiences of being unhappy, or their opinions of other religions. There was a sense that what was said in the diary room would remain in the diary room. At the end of the interviews the children thanked me enthusiastically and shouted goodbye as though they were parting from a friend [reflections from Big Brother].

This enthusiasm was expressed during the conversation with Big Brother by one of the informants:

Facilitator: What's the best thing you've done since you've been here?

Interviewee: Coming to the zone.

Facilitator: Why is that the best?

Interviewee: Because I'm with Big Brother.

Facilitator: Is this your favourite thing?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Facilitator: Great... Are you enjoying talking about what you're doing here and who you meet?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Outside the diary room the excitement of those who had been interviewed by Big Brother contributed to a mood of mystery and intrigue. Aware that Big Brother was female, one child who had been interviewed commented: “It’s not Big Brother. It’s Big Sister!” Another asked, “Who is Big Brother?” The chatter and excitement around Big Brother was further articulated when children came out of the diary room. Unable to answer questions of who Big Brother ‘was’ further participants signed up, assuming that someone, at some point, would see Big Brother. To maintain the mystery Big Brother did not emerge from the diary room for the duration of the activity thereby leaving some level of excitement with those that had participated.

According to Cree et al. (2002) a key ethical consideration when conducting research with children is whether they enjoyed taking part. The answer to that in the case of the Big Brother method is certainly affirmative. The method was successful in terms of fostering a sense of enthusiasm to take part. Further, the approach created a situation in which children were happy to talk about their views and experiences; this was also reflected on by researcher three who conducted the observations. This is, we believe, was due to the sense of confidentiality which lead to a feeling of security and also reflected the fun and novel nature of the experience.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper we have discussed the challenges of conducting research with children. We have responded to the need to develop new child-centred research techniques which move beyond the existing power relations among children and adults by anchoring our approach in the idea of mystery. By introducing a mixed-method design which includes one new technique – the Big Brother diary room – we were able to capture the unpredictable nature of the fieldwork, reflect on the ‘messiness’ of the research process and embrace spatial context of the research.

Entering the ‘messy’ space of the youth club, where children were engaged in ‘normal’ activities and socialisation, we recognised what the limitations of interviewing and researching children in this research site were. Children could be distracted by many other activities or could perceive us as other patronizing ‘adults’. Instead of structuring and governing the space we decided to fully embrace these qualities – children were given the autonomy to decide whether, how, and when to take part in the research.

Participants were very enthusiastic about the possibility of meeting and discovering Big Brother. This novel method proved that by breaking down the ‘traditional’ research participant power dynamic, we have been able to collect reflexive and rich research material. And yet this was not done by fully empowering and informing participants. Interview recordings from the diary room demonstrated that young participants were not ‘stripped’ of their power and agency, but felt more confident talking about difference in a secret room to an important figure, represented by Big Brother. Meanwhile, the researcher that ‘played’ Big Brother became less certain of her advantages as an adult researcher, since she could not observe and analyse non-verbal codes. In this paper we have provided a detailed account of the unpredictability of the research and reflected how we have overcome some of the emerging issues in the field. What has been revealed is that not all power imbalances are ‘bad’, not all are obvious, and that in using innovative methods we are able to explore the potentiality of subverting now established assumptions underlying research design.

As such, this paper contributes to the qualitative research methods applied both in research with children and adults. We believe that the Big Brother diary room, as a novel and creative research technique, could be more widely used by qualitative researchers, especially to challenge existing power relation in a given space. This method can generate rich data on sensitive topics, such as exclusion and prejudice, and elicit information which in a standard in-depth interview is difficult to obtain.

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