

## Focus groups with young people: a participatory approach to research planning

Anna Bagnoli<sup>a\*</sup> and Andrew Clark<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Sociology, PPSIS Faculty, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ, UK;* <sup>b</sup>*School of English, Sociology, Politics and Contemporary History, University of Salford, Salford M5 4WT, UK*

In this paper we present our experiences of conducting focus groups with young people as part of a participatory approach to research design and participant recruitment. The research is a prospective, 10-year, qualitative, longitudinal project investigating young people's daily lives, relationships, and identities, and the ways these change over time. It adopts a multi-method approach in which each participant has a choice about which methods to be involved with. Part of the project planning and recruitment was completed through focus groups held in schools across metropolitan and rural West Yorkshire with young people aged 13. The focus groups enabled us to recruit participants from a variety of backgrounds. They were also an important medium through which to elicit the views of young people (which were perceptively and constructively critical) about project design, methods development, and dissemination events. The paper focuses on what we learnt from these focus groups and considers the value of engaging participants in designing qualitative research.

**Keywords:** focus groups; young people; participatory research; research design

### Introduction

The Young Lives and Times project is an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded qualitative longitudinal study exploring the lives, relationships, and identities of young people over a prospective, 10-year period. The focus in this study is on understanding young people's everyday worlds, with attention to the different contexts they inhabit, family, school and social worlds more generally, and their relative importance in shaping their lives and identities over time. As a prospective, longitudinal study, this project relies on time as a crucial dimension in the unfolding of young people's biographies: with temporality being part of the research design, change is thus a central analytical focus (Thomson *et al.* 2003, Henderson *et al.* 2007). On an analytical level, this also means that interpretations may have a provisional value, since the accumulation of biographical data over a prolonged period of time may eventually lead researchers to review their earlier analyses (Holland and Thomson 2009).

In phase 1,<sup>1</sup> the project adopted a wide range of qualitative methods in the exploration of young people's lives. These included a set of visual tools, consisting of self-portraits, timelines, relational maps, photo elicitation tasks, and drawings that

---

\*Corresponding author. Email: ab247@cam.ac.uk

the young people engaged with during the course of two interviews, plus a set of optional tools, which included diaries, video diaries, collages, and walkabouts. Conceived so as to capture young people's everyday lives in a holistic way, and flexibly modelled to encourage participation according to young people's own wishes and preferences (Bagnoli 2009a), these methods were designed in response to a consultation exercise that we ran prior to the fieldwork.

This paper reflects on what we learned from this process, which, in addition to being one main source for accessing our sample, aimed to include young people in research design, taking their views into account on a number of issues, including research topics, choice of methods, ethics, and the value of qualitative longitudinal research, in order to develop a research design that not only could achieve its substantive objectives but also made the research process more meaningful to potential participants.

### **Research context: participatory research design**

In this section we review the methodological context of the research. We followed a participatory approach to research design that drew on the views and experiences of participants and potential participants to ensure a rigorous methodology that would hopefully prove appropriate for recording the experiences of young people in meaningful ways and generate and maintain their interest in the planned longitudinal research. We then briefly review the focus group method and reflect on the participatory potential of focus groups in research design.

### ***Participatory research***

Participatory research approaches are gaining popularity across social science disciplines. Their use has grown rapidly with post-positivist desires to question and challenge the principles and practices of conventional, objective and detached, frequently quantitative research approaches. What makes research 'participatory' is not the sort of research methods used, but rather the depth of involvement participants have in the whole research process (Kindon *et al.* 2007). For example, Cornwall (1996) and Biggs (1989) distinguish four modes of participation, ranging from contractual (whereby participants are contracted in to take part in research), through consultative (participants are consulted on their opinions), collaborative (participants work with 'academic researchers' on projects devised and controlled by the latter), and finally collegiate (participants work alongside 'academic researchers'). Positioned across this spectrum are issues of power relationships in research practices.

Questions about control and power, especially in the potentially exploitative relationship between the researcher and the researched has led to calls for more equitable collaboration in the research process. Thus, rather than purely 'knowledge for understanding', participatory research also focuses on 'knowledge for action', achieved through partnerships between traditionally trained researchers and lay-people in a community (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995). In participatory research, the researcher's role often becomes one of facilitator working collaboratively with research participants in projects that achieve action-orientated goals. The forms and extent of this collaboration vary from participants being involved in some, or every

aspect of the research process, including establishing research priorities and setting research questions, collecting and interpreting data (Clark *et al.* 2009), and disseminating results (Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre 1998, 1999). It is argued that this enables participants a say in determining what is being studied, and provides training in the rudiments of research methods so they can assume collaborative roles in the research. Consequently, participatory research is seen as a way of achieving a more 'relevant', morally aware, and non-hierarchical research practice (Fuller and Kitchen 2004, Pain 2004). The outcome is more than just an exercise in capacity building or the production of 'relevant' research, but it also produces alternative knowledge and more effective ways of understanding complex situations and relationships (Moser and McIlwaine 1999, Clark *et al.* 2009).

While, ideally, participatory research might be situated at what Biggs (1989) identified as a collegiate level of participation, with 'researchers and local people work[ing] together as colleagues with different skills to offer, in a process of mutual learning where local people have control over the process' (Cornwell and Jewkes 1995, p. 1669), this is difficult to achieve in practice and it raises additional ethical and epistemic questions (Cooke and Kothari 2001, Clark *et al.* 2009). We do not position our own research within an agenda of explicitly enabling social change or action research, but rather in the context of drawing on participants' experiences and views to design research that may be more appropriate to the world-views of potential participants and that consequently has the potential to make change by being better designed research (Peace 1999, Mosavel *et al.* 2005, Powers and Tiffany 2006).

Young people have begun to feature prominently in participatory research. This includes research that has sought to empower young people not only by including their 'voices' as experts on their own worlds (e.g. Alderson 1995), but also by involving them in data collection, such as through peer interviewing (Young and Barrett 2001, Burke 2005), in research design (Hart 1992), and dissemination (Van Blerk and Ansell 2007). In this paper, we contribute our own experiences to this work by reflecting on the use of focus groups with young people as a contribution to research design.

### **Focus groups with young people**

Focus groups are used throughout the social sciences (Morgan 1993, Goss 1996, Barber and Kitzinger 1999, Krueger and Casey 2000, Madriz 2003) as 'a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher' (Morgan 1996, p. 130). Morgan suggests there are thus three essential components to this definition. First, focus groups are a method devoted to data collection; second, the source of these data is the group interaction or discussion; and third, the researcher plays an active role in creating that discussion. Focus groups are seen as having exploratory potential by generating background information and clarifying ideas, and confirmatory potential; and by generating understanding of group reactions to particular problems, processes and patterns (Skop 2006). By generating data through interaction, focus groups thus represent a collectivistic rather than individualistic research method. The method has been used in research with young people to explore emotional aspects of sexual health

(van Teijlingen *et al.* 2007), experiences of alcohol use (Demant and Jarvinen 2006), sectarianism in Northern Ireland (Leonard 2006), transitions to adulthood and envisaging the future (Brannen and Nilsen 2002), experiences of living in poor urban neighbourhoods (Figueira and McDonough 1998), and the lives and times of young Muslim men in Scotland (Hopkins 2004).

It has been argued that a focus group can provide participants with a space in which they can define their own categories and labels, and unmask ideas and opinions through dialogue and debate with others. Thus, it is the interaction between participants, rather than between participant and researcher, that generates data, as participants are able to question one another (Kitzinger 1994). The method can also reveal multiple points of view and, by replacing the researcher's structure and foci of discussion with those of the participants, raise unanticipated issues (Skop 2006). However, focus groups can also be problematic in terms of method and analysis. Hopkins (2007), for example, has called for more critical and reflective debate on the nature of focus groups, particularly with regard to more 'creative' (p. 529) use in qualitative research, and also highlights the need to consider the influence of locality, context and timing on the nature of interactions in focus groups.

The nature of interaction in focus groups has been raised as a significant issue when analysing focus group material, including, for example, the role of the researcher or moderator, the phrasing of questions, and the interactions between participants (Morgan 1997, Barbour and Kitzinger 1999). Hyden and Bulow (2003) suggest that focus group participants talk and interact in many capacities and highlight two problems concerning the nature of participant interactions. The first problem concerns how and whether participants in a group establish common ground in their dialogue, and the second is whether participants then add their contributions to this common ground. This has implications for the extent to which it is consequently possible to attribute attitudes and opinions expressed in the focus group to individual participants, or to whether they are a function of the group's interaction. That is, whether the focus group data can be considered a collection of individual attitudes and opinions, or whether the interaction between participants results in emergent views that are not reducible to any one individual (Hyden and Bulow 2003). As a consequence, it has been argued that the benefit of the focus group lies not in the production of individual-level data, but in the production of data through social interaction (Kitzinger 1994, Hollander 2004).

Finally, returning to the issue of participatory research, Chui (2003), Madriz (2003) and Skop (2006) comment on the potential for focus groups to empower participants. In part, this is because they can potentially provide opportunity for marginalized groups to discuss issues relevant to their lives and share experiences with others from a similar social position in order to produce a collective testimony. Focus groups can ensure that the knowledge, language, and concepts and classifications used in focus group interactions are grounded in the voices and experiences of participants (Goss 1996). It has also been suggested that the group situation redresses the power of the researcher over participants, decreases researcher control, and encourages the free expression of ideas during informal interaction (Wilkinson 1998, Madriz 2003). Overall, it has been argued that the collective

experience of focus groups can empower participants to take control of the research process, and discuss issues that are of concern or interest in a language and framework that make sense to them. In doing so, as we suggest here, focus groups can also provide the opportunity for participants to contribute to research design and, ultimately, the production of research and data that are more meaningful.

### **Participating in research planning: the focus group method**

We followed Kitzinger's (1994) and Krueger and Casey's (2000) recommendations for running successful focus groups, including that participants share similar characteristics and are acquainted with each other. In spring 2006, we ran a total of 22 focus groups with young people aged 12–13 across West Yorkshire, visiting six schools and one youth club. Between five and eight young people attended each session. The locations included both affluent and less affluent areas in inner-city, suburban, and rural settings.

The focus groups started with a 5-minute general introduction to the intended aims of the study, followed by the showing of a 20-minute extract from the film *Seven Plus Seven* in Michael Apted's *Seven Up* television-documentary series.<sup>2</sup> This documentary has been following a group of people from 1964, when the participants were aged 7. The film shows young people aged 14 talking about their lives and reflecting on their participation in the previous film made 7 years earlier. Thus, showing extracts from this documentary provided a good introduction to the project, and particularly to the themes of biographical and longitudinal research.

After viewing of the *Seven Up* documentary 30-minute discussions were held with groups of young people covering the following themes: maintaining young people's interest and participation in longitudinal research, research methods, project website design, dealing with sensitive topics and ethical issues, ensuring participants' privacy and anonymity, dissemination and archiving, and rewarding participants.

At the end of discussions, we distributed leaflets about the project, which included reply slips for joining the study, as well as letters addressed to parents or guardians with the aim of recruiting some of the young people who took part in the focus groups to become involved more fully in the project. Thirty of those who participated in the focus groups went on to sign up to the project, suggesting that as a method of recruitment, the focus groups were of considerable benefit. Moreover, the focus groups also enabled us to develop a research design that was more closely aligned to the views, experiences and expectations of the participants. However, while we endeavoured to accommodate all the suggestions, there were conflicting opinions about how best to do longitudinal qualitative research, about some of the more 'academic' aims of the project, and about the time and monetary resources available to us. In the remainder of the paper, we present some of the young people's views on potentially participating in research, and reflect on some of the implications and tensions that can arise from participatory research planning exercises.

### The value of doing longitudinal research

The young people we met seemed to consider longitudinal research to be a worthwhile endeavour. They thought that following up people over time might be interesting for appreciating change:

**Sonia**<sup>3</sup>: I think it's good because when they get older you can see how their opinion changes and different aspects on life and things like that.

**Amanda**: I think it's a good idea because you find out what people think when they're young and if you go back every year, you find out like how they change and it's interesting.

(focus group 7)

Observing how people's lives and opinions change over the years emerged as an important aim for these young people, and asking similar questions at different points in time was considered particularly useful. In one of the schools, students wrote feedback on Post-it notes after the viewing, in a collective exercise. One of these notes positively remarked about the questions that were being asked at different waves:

What was good? They asked them similar questions when they were younger and older.  
(participant's note)

In addition, some young people thought having a record similar to that in the documentary film would be useful for remembering what life was like:

**Emma**: Yeah, I think it's, it is really useful because then people nowadays can also look back on it and they, people that took part can look back on it so they can see the comparisons and also between the 2 schools, well more than 2 schools, different types of schools. (...) And the different ways they like lived, like the different and also wouldn't you forget what it would be like when you were younger if you didn't have that. You wouldn't remember.

**Laura**: They were good 'cos you could like see the differences and that, how it was like that then.

**AB**: Yes?

**Laura**: It was good 'cos you can see what changes happened over the years.

(focus group 10)

The young people readily identified with the idea that this type of research would allow longitudinal and cross-sectional analysis. Of the latter, the significance of social class in different experiences and world-views identified proved particularly interesting to the focus group participants. The documentary film followed individuals who, superficially at least, could be identified as being from different class backgrounds:

**AC**: What did you think of the film?

**Terry**: I liked the idea that there were posh people and common people.

(focus group 5)

At one point in the documentary there is a retrospective showing of three boys aged 7 who attend a private preparatory school discussing the newspapers they read, including *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Financial Times*. The earnestness of their conversation had a rather comic effect on a contemporary audience, and prompted considerable comment on the class consciousness of young people. In particular, there was criticism from many of the focus group participants about the distance between their own ideas and those of the 7-year-old boys:

**Ellie:** It was old-fashioned . . . Yeah. It was just boring.

**AB:** (To Andrea) Do you think the same, that it was boring?

**Andrea:** Yeah, especially the smart little kids reading the newspaper.  
(focus group 14)

The language of the boys in the film is a strong social class marker from which participants variously took their distance, here making a comparison between private education in the 1960s and their own state-provided education today:

**Jenny:** They're probably more educated than we are now (laughter).

**Ben:** 'Cos like they were proper posh and they got, er, they actually had, did they have the cane then or summat? And they were right more educated but now they've slacked.  
(joint laughter).  
(focus group 13)

The 'proper posh' boys were considered 'more educated' even at age 7 than these 14-year-olds, while reference to corporal punishment raised their curiosity about a world that perhaps offered a stricter, more formal educational environment. For the focus group participants from this predominantly working-class district, hearing 'people talking like that' was not an everyday experience:

**Rachel:** We don't hear people talking like that (laugh) or very many people talking like that ( . . . )

**Ben:** They're really well educated for 7-year-olds.

**Interviewer:** You thought so?

**Rachel:** Compared to now they are.

**Kelly:** To us (joint laughter).  
(focus group 13)

Although the participants of *Seven Up* were felt to be very distant from everyday life, the idea of taking part in a similar study was still nonetheless considered a positive process:

**Kelly:** We've learnt what it was like to be them, posh people (joint laughter). They could learn to be what it's like to be us.

**Rachel:** Common (laughter).  
(focus group 13)

Learning about the lives of people whose circumstances are very different from their own was thus seen as an instructive experience. When asking about the types of reward participants might receive from participating in a longitudinal research project, not all responses focused on monetary or material items. Responses also included having 'someone to share their opinion with', and the opportunity to reflect on and learn from life experiences:

**Bethany:** They might learn about themselves when they're older.

**AB:** Yeah?

**Louise:** They might think about the problems instead of like putting them to the back of your mind.  
(focus group 15)

The learning was also connected to the possibility of being of help to others:

**Lorna:** Teenagers like us if they would go on the [project] website and read that we've got a problem and they've got the same problem they're like they would listen to us and

we might help them.  
(focus group 1)

Others thought that participating would improve their social skills and improve their confidence along with the potential for academic outputs:

**Emma:** It'll be an experience which not that many people have, just a selection.

**Mia:** And would we all get given a copy of whatever is published?

(focus group 10)

However, the opportunity to receive tangible rewards was also considered important. Inspired by a scene in the documentary film in which all the participants are seen together on a trip to the London zoo, several focus group participants said they would like to meet with all the others taking part in the study through 'away days' such as trips to the zoo, the aquarium, theme parks, and activities such as bowling. In response, the research team did take on this suggestion, and in 2008 we organized a drama workshop for our participants as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science.<sup>4</sup> The focus groups also discussed monetary reward, and in particular providing gift vouchers:

**Phil:** That's just like bribery, innit?

(focus group 3)

Despite awareness of some of the ethical issues concerned, focus group participants suggested that some form of monetary reward would be generally appreciated, and they had strong views on the types of shops where they would like to be able to use those vouchers. Their suggestions were followed up during the research project when gift vouchers were offered for participation in some of the optional activities. Other rewards considered desirable included getting free chocolate, sweets, and biscuits during the interview; being given iPods, DVDs, and comics; and the opportunity to miss lessons at school.

### **Data collection: substantive themes and topics**

Although the documentary film garnered interest in longitudinal research, many of the young people also commented that they had found the programme 'boring'. As previously indicated, the black-and-white format of the first episode of the series, filmed in 1964, often seemed to be enough to alienate today's media-savvy teenagers. However, it was also clear that the themes and topics covered in the documentary were deemed irrelevant to contemporary young people:

**AB:** What did you think of the questions?

**Thomas:** They were a bit old-fashioned. Just asking what they wanted to do when they grow up, they all have a certain answer, they're like education was pre-planned and that.

**AB:** Yeah, so what else would have been more interesting to, like you know, to find out about them?

**Thomas:** What do you really want to be when you grow up like, what are your thoughts on like your parents and that?

**AB:** OK, yeah, that's a good idea.

**Steve:** I think they should ask like: what car do you want?

**AB:** What car do you want?



**Steve:** Or where do you want to go on holiday, or do you want, what do you want?

**AB:** OK, so not just education and school.

**Steve:** Not just education, about your social life and relationships and stuff.

(focus group 4)

Focus group participants were keen that data collection should focus on their social lives, extra-curricular interests, and opinions about the world:

**AB:** What sort of questions would you like?

**Amanda:** Things like ... what I actually thought of ... you know, what films I watched, what types of movies, or ... em... what I think of things like ... I don't know ... lessons ... like that.

(focus group 7)

As one participant wrote in one Post-it, questions should focus more on 'what we thought and what we wanted to talk about'. Focus group participants considered the interview method used for the documentary film to be too talk-based and adult-oriented in their topics, and suggested that they would have liked to have a guiding role in influencing the interview agenda:

**AC:** How could we keep people more interested? (...)

**Jamie:** Just asking questions about what we think...

**AC:** Instead of?

**Jamie:** Talking too much ... because we get bored. They [in *Seven Up*] were bored.

(focus group 8)

Discussions also touched on several issues which seemingly should not be breached in research on the lives of young people. For example, issues around family circumstance and relationships were considered too personal to discuss:

**Interviewer:** Were there any questions that you would have really liked to have answered yourself or not answered yourself, can you think?

**Oliver:** I think they're a bit too personal answer.

**Interviewer:** Yeah but which, which ones in particular can you...?

**Oliver:** Er that one about the dad.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Jonathan:** That were personal that.

**Oliver:** Yeah, 'cos he might not have wanted to talk about his dad.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Jonathan:** Yeah, I was thinking (...) his life's his personal business, he might not have wanted everyone to know about it.

(focus group 18)

**Interviewer:** Were there any questions that you would've like to have answered or not liked to have answered?

**Phil:** Ones where that lad were talking about a dad. And knowing nothing about a dad 'cos I didn't even know my dad either. I do know him but I don't see him.

**Jason:** Same here.

**Interviewer:** So that kind of...

**Jason:** Well, I do see him sometimes but only, only when I can be bothered to go and see him...

**Nick:** We all ain't got no dads.

(focus group 3)

It was suggested that participants might lie if confronted with embarrassing questions, most notably in response to questions about sexuality:

**Paul:** Don't ask about sexual relations ( ...) We never answer those questions for anyone.

(focus group 2)

**Hannah:** And the questions ... 'Do you have a girlfriend?' Not a very necessary question.

(focus group 14)

Sensitive topics were one of the ethical issues that we discussed with the young people. Another was anonymity, and how best to protect the identities of those taking part in research. The young people's answers often questioned the extent to which researchers should protect the identities of participants:

**Mia:** Do, do you have to protect them because or some people might not mind having a photo on?

**Emma:** Yeah.

**AB:** Yeah, so we should ask first?

**Girls** (joint replies): Yeah.

**Laura:** And find out if their parents mind.

**AB:** And the parents.

**Laura:** Yeah. 'Cos you might get like a variety of some people that would want to do and some people that don't.

**Mia:** Some don't really mind.

(focus group 10)

Some suggested they would not be concerned if their identities were made public, and one focus group participant failed to see the point of having their details changed, either in an image, or in their personal details:

**Amanda:** I wouldn't mind people knowing my name ... when you got mentioned in a newspaper ... they might think there was someone who looked like you but did not have your name!

(focus group 7)

Central to longitudinal research is the nature and extent of archiving material. This was an issue we were keen to solicit views on from focus group participants, though we needed to explain what we meant by the term. We suggested that all data collected would be deposited in an archive at our institution. It was clear that the young people wanted some control over this process:

**Peter:** There can be some personal questions asked if you don't want them to go in then you can then say like – cut that bit out – so no one can listen to it.

(focus group 9)

The young people were keen to claim authority over their lives, expressing a desire to veto what should or should not go into the archive and what should be made public about their life experiences.

### **The need for colour: suggestions for methods**

One of the challenges of longitudinal research with young people concerns maintaining participants' interest in the project. One way of encouraging participation over time may be by designing methods of data collection that can reflect participants' different interests and expressive styles, with a flexibility that can allow them to build a greater sense of ownership of the research (Thomson and Holland

2005, Bagnoli 2009a). Focus group participants had a clear idea that they wanted to be in control over the methods with which we would collect their data, and this did not involve 'just sitting and talking' to an adult:

**Amanda:** Maybe if you actually do the interviews, ask us what kind of questions we would prefer to be asked (...) and if like you meet us beforehand, find out what we are interested in and then you can put questions on ... if you tell us what the questions are instead of being put on the spot, maybe we would have had time to think.  
(focus group 7)

**AC:** What did you think of the [documentary] film?

**Alex:** It was all right, but it wasn't that interesting.

**AC:** What could have made it more interesting?

**Alex:** A lot of talking ... people find it boring.

**AC:** A bit more action?

**Katherine:** Yes. They were just sitting and talking.

**AC:** What could have made it more interesting?

**Joshua:** You could ask us to do stuff and see how well you could do it (...).

**Katherine:** Like, putting them in a situation and then asking them a question. I don't know what situation, but not just having a chat and talking.

(focus group 5)

Interviews were considered more appropriate if they are not conceived as formal and 'separate' social encounters, but rather as more informal, participative interactions, conducted while experiencing a part of participants' everyday life. 'A day in the life' interviewing was the style of choice for many of our respondents:

**Interviewer:** What sorts of things, what could we do that would make it more interesting for people?

**Rebecca:** Maybe go to places where they hang out.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Rebecca:** And say like, oh this is where we hang out and everything like that.

(focus group 9)

Focus group participants also seemingly preferred to be interviewed in groups and with friends rather than alone, though it was recognized that some issues should only be discussed in more private, one-to-one interactions:

**AC:** Is there anything about the film you did not like?

**Jade:** When they were interviewed alone.

(focus group 16)

**Amanda:** It's a bit uncomfortable having to sit on your own, on a one to one ... because you know it's harder to think and they are just concentrating on you. But it's a lot better when you are with your friends, because you find it easier to talk.

**Sonia:** There are things you would not normally talk to your friends about, and you are talking to someone you have only just met, really ... that would be a bit uncomfortable.

(focus group 7)

Overall, the young people called for what could be termed a 'need for colour' in research methods that were better able to produce data about everyday life.

Establishing rapport with participants was considered fundamental to the success of the research. It was also recognized that young people would react in different ways to interviews, and that therefore methods should attempt to respond to the different needs and personalities of those taking part. Other ways of collecting data and keeping in touch were thus suggested in addition to interviews with voice

recording, and many of these involved writing: letters in which you ‘tell what you’ve been doing, how your life changes’, postcards, email, and text messages, as well as speaking on the phone. Although for some writing was deemed an appropriate means of communicating, for others, like the group of boys in the extract below, this was too ‘boring’:

**AB:** If you were asked, for instance, to keep diaries, would you...?

**Chorus:** No way!

**Thomas:** Diaries are for girls.

**AB:** Not even like an email diary?

**John:** I don’t have time.

**Thomas:** Like ‘I came home from school today...’

(focus group 4)

Reflecting something of the nature of the current media age, several suggested that making video diaries would be a useful way of communicating what their lives were like. Video diaries were considered ‘good fun’ and the video a more direct medium that can overcome the obstacles that writing might potentially introduce for some young people:

**Mia:** And you wouldn’t, it’d be quite hard if you like had to write it down what you’re trying to say sometimes it is.

**Lucy:** Yeah.

**AB:** Mm.

**Lucy:** And so if you say it, it will be easier.

**Mia:** And also using a film-making process and things like that are a lot and young people would enjoy it more than write, having to write it all out.

(focus group 10)

One group of girls suggested using a video camera to make something similar to a scrapbook, on the basis of what is interesting and relevant in their own view. The element of trust that this more participant-centred method introduces in the research relationship was also highlighted as important:

**Amanda:** Maybe if you are using a video camera ... but give the camera to the kids during the day, sort of when they are going out or something, what sort of things they get up to ... so that they are not trying to show off to anybody, just being it themselves.

**Molly:** I think that idea is quite a good idea.

**AB:** With the video camera?

**Molly:** With the video camera, yeah (...). If you have a camera, taking pictures of what sort of things you like to do, like a scrapbook.

**Sonia:** I agree about the video camera thing ... because it makes it more interesting and it makes them feel like you trust them, giving them a bit of responsibility.

(focus group 7)

For other young people, making a video in collaboration with their friends and relatives was a more appealing idea, since this may provide a greater sense of control:

**Jonathan:** I think it would be better if you like, if someone, if one of your friends or your family did it for you ‘cos you’re more confident with that person.

**Interviewer:** Right, so you could record yourself through the day without the researcher being there, maybe?

**Jonathan:** Yeah.

(focus group 18)

Despite widespread enthusiasm for a video diary method, concerns were expressed about 'being worried about what you look like'. Drawing methods also had some reservations, notably around the extent of creative ability or artistic talents. Notably, the popularity of the video method is not necessarily due to its better capacity to access or represent participants' real lives, but rather it can be understood against the cultural backdrop of reality television shows:

**AC:** We are interested in other ways that we can find out about people's lives. We could interview people like this, but can you think about other ways?

**Dave:** Put cameras all around the house, but not in the bathroom or in the bedroom.

**Amy:** Like Big Brother!

(focus group 16)

We also received some enthusiastic ideas about placing hidden cameras in everyday situations, such as buses or in the context of specially organized events, 'a disco for all the people taking part', or in a lift that was programmed to malfunction. Reality TV programmes like Big Brother are well instituted in the visual culture of this generation, and the culture of surveillance implicit in these programmes, as well as in the wider world, seems to be part of their way of perceiving the world. Video diaries were one of the methods we eventually used in the research, and the style of the videos that would be produced frequently mimicked those of mainstream television formats. In addition to video, focus group participants were enthusiastic users of other new technologies, including the Internet and MSN, and mentioned these as good ways to keep in touch. Seemingly, writing an Internet blog was not a 'boring' option:

**Ben:** Could you do like a website and then have like a message box-type thing that we like typed in like in (...) and then we actually wrote what we've done like as a diary. It'd be nice.

(focus group 13)

As we discuss below, the ways in which new and established media have contributed to young people's media literacy (Buckingham 2005) have implications for how we developed appropriate ethical strategies within a framework of participatory research design. The significance of the Internet for many young people also provoked interest in the research website. It was clear that the academic title of the research did not receive much favour as a domain name:

**Adam:** What's it called, Young People's...?

**AB:** Young People's Lives and Times.

**Steve:** Oh, that's, well, boring!

(focus group 4)

'Our Lives' was eventually chosen as domain name for the project, and it was suggested by one of the focus group participants. Other recommendations for the website included that it should have images and pictures, as well as a question sheet to log on and answer, a quiz, a word search, and games. The importance of the website's visual design was emphasized:

**Louise:** You could have it bright colours so that it's eye-catching, and not so much writing on it. People might go on and not understand what it says.

(focus group 15)

Some girls further specified that the website should have half the page in what they considered girls' colours, pink and purple, and half in boys' colours, like blue. The website was also thought of as an interesting vehicle to get to know the other participants in the study, including those coming from different schools.

## Discussion

In this final section we reflect on the participatory potential for research design with young people, and in particular consider three areas where possible tensions arise between the views of participants and those of academic researchers that have wider implications for participatory approaches to research. Many aspects of academic research, including time frames, budgets, and fixed-term research contracts, may combine to constrain the full participation of all participants at different levels of the research process. Tensions can also arise between the desires and demands of participants (or in our case, potential participants) and the aims and objectives desired by academic researchers and/or funding councils.

The first possible tension concerns the aims of the research and motivations of those involved. While we had a particular set of 'academic' aims and objectives we hoped to achieve through the project, and which our funding body is expecting to see, these did not necessarily accord with the motivations of potential participants. For example, some of the young people expressed concern at the inclusion of sensitive issues. The nature of young people's social relationships and sexualities, for example, were themes that we were told were 'off-limits' to researchers. Yet, the ways in which young people's social worlds change over time is a particularly significant theme of the Young Lives and Times study. While the reservations of focus group participants did not deter us from developing this theme in the research, their comments did encourage us to think more creatively about how we could appropriately access such information.

A second issue concerned the popularity of the use of innovative methods in the research. It was clear that visual methods, including video diaries, were a popular demand from focus group participants. While we were able to accommodate some of this demand, we are also aware of some of the shortcomings of such methods, such as the complex ethical issues they pose, for instance, regarding data analysis, dissemination and archiving. We were also keen to continue to draw on the benefits of more 'traditional' methods, notably interviews, to explore young people's identities and life experiences, given that their utility is well established. However, the young people's concerns that participating in research would not solely involve 'having a chat' encouraged us to develop more creative aspects to the interviews, including incorporating elements of participatory mapping, timelines, and arts-based methods (Bagnoli 2009).

A final issue concerns the potential dissonance over ethical research. The desire for the use of creative visual research methods raises particular ethical considerations (Prosser *et al.* 2008). Sensitive topics aside, focus group participants did not want to be anonymized in visual or textual data, and were keen to have their own voices heard and identities revealed in the data archive. Their desire for group-based methods also raises challenges for the nature of confidentiality and anonymity, and the popularity of receiving some kind of reward for their participation is also not without its ethical (as well as budgetary) considerations. In such situations, academic

researchers may have to go against the decisions of participants in order to preserve the ethical integrity of the research while ironically going against the philosophy of a participatory approach.

The enthusiasm with which focus group participants suggested using media technologies relates to issues of media literacy. Ofcom (the UK regulator for broadcasting and telecommunications) defines media literacy as 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts' (Buckingham 2005, p. 3). Media literacy is partly about the use of telecommunication technologies, but also about critical understanding, evaluation and judgement and creating media for the purpose of self-expression (Buckingham 2005). The extent to which the young people appeared to express different levels of media literacy thus raises further ethical issues. This is not least because encouraging participants to express their identities through Internet-based communication requires significant personal investments in self-representation (Buckingham 2007).

Research suggests that the participants in our focus groups, and indeed our wider study, are at a stage when they potentially become more aware of the impacts of media representations and begin to speculate about the ideological impact of television and its potential effects on audiences compared to younger children (Buckingham 1996, Facer *et al.* 2003, Livingston and Bober 2003, 2004). By early adolescence, Buckingham suggests that 'it would not be unreasonable to conclude that ... most young people have developed a substantial critical awareness, at least in relation to the media with which they are most familiar' (p. 22). Buckingham (2007) goes on to outline the particular impact of some genres of television shows:

As media genres change and evolve, new forms of literacy are clearly required. One development of particular relevance here is the emergence of so-called 'reality TV' (in the form of shows like *Big Brother*), and of the growing popularity of more entertainment-based forms of factual television ... These new forms [of television programmes] raise significant questions about viewers' ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, and their awareness of the various forms of manipulation that such programmes typically entail. (p. 16)

Returning to the enthusiasm for using innovative technological methods such as video diaries and the website, and particularly the desire to design a research project modelled on reality television shows such as *Big Brother*, it is important to question the extent to which the young people we spoke to fully understood the processes involved in documenting their lives in these ways. While we are not suggesting that this means the focus group participants were ethically naive, for as we have discussed above, participants were able to articulate different ethical issues and perspectives, it does suggest a further reason for caution about adopting uncritically all the suggestions that were proposed so enthusiastically.

When establishing the methods for the first wave of the longitudinal study, we built on many of the suggestions that emerged from the focus groups and translated the young people's request for creativity and innovation into developing a wide range of qualitative methods for them to be involved with. These methods included self-portraits, relational maps, photo elicitation tasks, and timelines, which were administered during two successive interviews (Bagnoli 2009b), after which a booklet offered them a choice of further methods or 'activities' including collages, 'official' photographs, videoed walkabouts, diaries, and video diaries. A project website was launched in 2008, aiming to develop a more continuous and interactive

approach to data collection in addition to keeping in touch with participants, and providing updates and background information about the research. The website was designed on the basis of the input of focus group participants as well as through further consultation with a subgroup of volunteers. In basing our research methods on the expectations and ideas of its potential participants, we believe that we developed a research project that was better suited and more relevant to young people, and which consequently enabled us to produce data that are a little closer to the everyday realities of young people's lives and times.

## **Conclusion**

The young people's participation in the focus groups indicated that they were positively inclined to longitudinal research. They appreciated the potential for gaining insight into personal as well as social change and saw value in their ability to help them to remember and learn about themselves and others. Our idea of showing an extract from the television documentary was particularly successful in eliciting discussion on the value of longitudinal research, while also generating critical commentaries on more inappropriate ways of documenting and representing young people's lives. In particular, the desire for 'colour' in the ways in which they could become involved in the research raised issues about how we could think creatively about what were perceived as 'static' and 'boring' interviews, as well as raised our awareness of themes and issues that would be interesting for pursue, and those where we would need to tread more carefully. Overall, the focus group participants expressed a desire for control over the methods employed in the research, did not want to be 'put on the spot', and offered various modalities in which they thought they could best communicate with researchers. The young people also demonstrated an awareness of ethical considerations, including the need for editing data prior to archiving or dissemination, and raised important concerns about anonymity, which, while often challenging for researchers, were seemingly not considered so pressing an issue. Though this is certainly not to suggest that we should consequently do away with ethical procedures, it does raise important issues about the power of researchers when protecting the identities of research participants.

Overall, through this participatory approach to research design, we aimed to extend young people's participation in research. We believe we succeeded in developing a research project that would be relevant to young people and that they could partly 'own'. Engaging with the young people's views encouraged us to think more creatively about our methods. The process began to demystify some of the research process for participants, while we were able to understand ways in which issues such as research ethics or asking about sensitive topics are understood by participants and potential participants. In doing so, we also learned the areas for potential conflicts between our own views on how best to proceed with research and the views of participants. Ensuring participation in research is a complex task, with many challenges and few shortcuts or quick solutions, but we hope our experiences contribute to ideas and debates in this area.



## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the young people and school staff who were involved in the focus groups. Bren Neale also conducted focus groups with us and was Principal Investigator on the Young Lives and Times project. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

## Notes

1. Phase 1 of the project (2005–08) was funded under the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Real Life Methods Node.
2. Apted, M. (1970; director and producer). *Seven Plus Seven*. Granada Television. Run time: 52 minutes. Also known informally as *14-Up*.
3. All names are pseudonyms.
4. The event, 'Timescapes: Exhibiting the Young Lives and Times Project Through Drama and Visual Display', was funded by the ESRC with grant no. RES-622-26-0074.

## References

- Alderson, P., 1995. *Listening to children: children, ethics and social research*. Ilford: Dr Barnardo's.
- Bagnoli, A., 2009a. Researching identities with multi-method autobiographies. In: B. Harrison, ed. *Life story research*. Sage Benchmarks in Social Research Methods. London: Sage, vol. 3, 376–397. Originally published in *Sociological research online*, 9 (2). Available from: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/9/2/bagnoli.html> [Accessed 20 May 2009].
- Bagnoli, A., 2009b. Beyond the standard interview: the use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods. *Qualitative research* (special issue, A. Coffey and C. Taylor, eds.), 9 (5), 547–570.
- Barbour, R. and Kitzinger, J., 1999. *Developing focus group research: politics, theory and practice*. London: Sage.
- Biggs, S., 1989. Resource-poor farmer participation in research: a synthesis of experiences from nine national agricultural research assistants. Ofcom comparative study paper no. 3. The Hague: International Service for National Agricultural Research.
- Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., and Robson, K., 2001. *Focus groups in social research*. London: Sage.
- Brannen, J. and Nilsen, A., 2002. Young people's time perspectives: from youth to adulthood. *Sociology*, 36 (3), 513–537.
- Buckingham, D., 1996. *Moving images: understanding children's emotional responses to television*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Buckingham, D., with Banaji, S., Burn, A., Carr, D., et al., 2005. *The media literacy of children and young people: a review of the academic research*. London: Ofcom.
- Buckingham, D. with Whiteman, N., Willett, R. and Burn, A., 2007. *The impact of the media on children and young people with a particular focus on computer games and the Internet*. Report prepared for the Byron Review on Children and New Technology. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- Chiu, L., 2003. Transformational potential of focus group practice in participatory action research. *Action research*, 1 (2), 165–183.
- Clark, A., Holland, C., Katz, J. and Peace, S. 2009. Learning to see: lessons from a participatory observation project in public spaces. *International journal of social research methodology*, 12, 345–360.
- Cooke, B. and Kothari, U., eds. 2001. *Participation: the new tyranny*. London: Zed Books.
- Cornwall, A., 1996. Towards participatory practice: participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and the participatory process. In: K. de Koning and M. Martin, eds. *Participatory research in health: issues and experiences*. London: Zed Books, 94–103.
- Cornwall, A. and Jewkes, R., 1995. What is participatory research? *Social science and medicine*, 41, 1667–1676.

- Demant, J. and Järvinen, M., 2006. Constructing maturity through alcohol experience: focus group interviews with teenagers. *Addiction research and theory*, 14 (6), 589–602.
- Facer, K., Furlong, J., Furlong, R., and Sutherland, R., 2003. *ScreenPlay: children and computing in the home*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Figueira-McDonough, J., 1998. Environment and interaction: voices of young people in poor inner-city neighborhoods. *Youth and society*, 30 (2), 123–163.
- Fuller, D. and Kitchen, R., 2004. Radical theory/critical praxis: academic geography beyond in the academy? In: D. Fuller and R. Kitchen, eds. *Radical theory/critical praxis: making a difference beyond the academy?* Vernon and Victoria, BC: Praxis (e)Press, 1–20.
- Goss, J., 1996. Introduction to focus groups. *Area*, 28 (2), 113–114.
- Hart, R., 1992. *Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.
- Henderson, S., Holland, J., McGrellis, S., et al., 2007. *Inventing adulthoods: a biographical approach to youth transitions*. London: Sage.
- Hollander, J., 2004. The social contexts of focus groups. *Journal of contemporary ethnography*, 33 (5), 602–637.
- Holland, J. and Thomson, R., 2009. Gaining perspective on choice and fate: revisiting critical moments. *European societies* (special issue, A. Bagnoli and K. Ketokivi, eds.), 11 (3), 451–469.
- Hopkins, P., 2004. Young Muslim men in Scotland: inclusions and exclusions. *Children's geographies*, 2 (2), 257–272.
- Hopkins, P., 2007. Thinking critically and creatively about focus groups. *Area*, 39 (4), 528–535.
- Hydén, L. and Bülow, P., 2001. Who's talking: drawing conclusions from focus groups – some methodological considerations. *International journal of social research methodology*, 6 (4), 305–321.
- Kindon, S., Pain, R., and Kesby, M., eds., 2007. *Participatory action research approaches and methods: connecting people, participation and place*. London: Routledge.
- Kitzinger, J., 1994. The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociology of health and illness*, 16 (1), 103–121.
- Krueger, R. and Casey, M., 2000. *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Leonard, M., 2006. Teenagers telling sectarian stories. *Sociology*, 40 (6), 1117–1133.
- Livingstone, S. and Bober, M., 2003. *UK Children go online. Listening to young people's experiences*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Livingstone, S. and Bober, M., 2004. *UK children go online: surveying the experiences of young people and their parents*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Madriz, E., 2003. Focus groups in feminist research. In: N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, eds. *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 835–850.
- Morgan, D., 1996. Focus groups. *Sociology*, 22, 129–156.
- Morgan, D., 1997. *Focus groups as qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Mosavel, M., Simon, C., van Stade, D., and Buchbinder, M., 2005. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) in South Africa: engaging multiple constituents to shape the research question. *Social science and medicine*, 61, 2577–2587.
- Moser, C. and McIlwaine, C., 1999. Participatory urban appraisal and its application for research on violence. *Environment and urbanization*, 11, 203–226.
- Pain, R., 2004. Social geography: participatory research. *Progress in human geography*, 28 (5), 652–663.
- Peace, S., ed. 1999. *Involving older people in research: 'an amateur doing the work of a professional?'* London: Centre for Policy on Ageing/Open University.
- Powers, J. and Tiffany, J., 2006. Engaging youth in participatory research and evaluation. *Journal of public health management and practice*, supplement, 12 (6), 79–87.
- Pratt, G., in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre, 1998. Inscripting domestic work on Filipina bodies. In: H. Nast and S. Pile, eds. *Places through the body*. London: Routledge, 283–304.
- Pratt, G., in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre, 1999. Is this Canada? Domestic workers' experiences in Vancouver, B.C. In: J. Momsen, ed. *Gender, migration and domestic service*. New York: Routledge, 23–42.

- Prosser, J., Clark, A. and Wiles, R., 2008. *Visual research ethics at the crossroads*. A working paper of ESRC National Centre for Research Methods: realities node [online]. Available from: <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/realities/> [Accessed 1 June 2009].
- Skop, E., 2006. The methodological potential of focus groups in population geography. *Population, space and place*, 12 (2), 113–124.
- Thomson, R., Plumridge, L. and Holland, J., 2003. Longitudinal qualitative research: a developing methodology. *International journal of social research methodology*, special issue, 6(3).
- Thomson, R. and Holland, J., 2005. 'Thanks for the memory': memory books as a methodological resource in biographical research. *Qualitative Research*, 5 (2), 201–219.
- van Blerk, L. and Ansell, N., 2007. Participatory feedback and dissemination with and for children: reflections from research with young migrants in southern Africa. *Children's geographies*, 5 (3), 313–324.
- van Teijlingen, E., Reid, J., Shucksmith, J., *et al.*, 2007. Embarrassment as a key emotion in young people talking about sexual health. *Sociological research online*, 12(2). Available from: [http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/2/van\\_teijlingen.html](http://www.socresonline.org.uk/12/2/van_teijlingen.html) [Accessed 1 March 2009].
- Young, L. and Barrett, H., 2001. Adapting visual methods: action research with Kampala street children. *Area*, 33, 141–152.

Copyright of Journal of Youth Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.