

“You’re not a stranger but you are a stranger”: Reflections on the participant-researcher relationship in the Following Fathers Study

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Introduction

Ethical conduct is a fundamental principle in any type of research. At the beginning of a project, researchers need to consider appropriate protocol and assess for potential risks. During the fieldwork stage, researchers should consider the safety of both the participant and themselves, and the complexities of the fieldwork encounter. Towards the end of a study, researchers should maintain their ethical duties regarding the dissemination of findings. Ethics is clearly an integral part of the research process and wide spanning. The consideration of ethics is further heightened when using qualitative longitudinal (QL) methods (Neale and Hanna, 2012), due to the prolonged period of contact with participants and the nature of the researcher-researched relationship which can form from such approaches. As Flewitt (2005) suggests, within QL enquires the relationship between the investigator and participant is built upon mutual understanding, reciprocal trust and collaboration and such feelings can potentially be heightened.

In the Following Fathers (FF) project based at the University of Leeds, QL approaches were employed to investigate the lived experiences of young fatherhood (defined as parenthood under the age of 25). QL research was chosen as it is ideally suited to exploring the lived experience of change and continuity in the social world, the processes by which change occurs, and the agency of individuals in shaping or accommodating to these processes (Neale, 2011). In this article, the nature of the interviews and the longitudinal element of the project shall be discussed, to understand how such factors can blur the relationship boundaries between the researcher and the researched. The various mechanisms used to minimise the transgression of relationship roles will then be explored.

Background of study

The FF project was a part of the Timescapes Young Lives and Times project at the University of Leeds (2006-2010). Young Lives and Times aimed to shed light on how young people practice and 'work out' their personal relationships and identities at a time of intense change through their teenage years, and in relation to their values and aspirations for the future. In 2010, a sub-sample of young fathers was included to better explore the diverse experiences of young people. We wanted to investigate early fatherhood as part of the life journeys of the young men: their histories, family backgrounds, and future aspirations. The aim was to produce in-depth knowledge about the life chances of young fathers and their children for professional practice and policy.

FF was developed in collaboration with a regional network of specialist service providers at its inception. Eleven of the twelve young men were recruited via a local authority educational mentoring service, located in a metropolitan city in Northern England. Our close partnership with the local team enabled us to engage with a marginalised group that would be 'hard to reach' using indirect methods of recruitment or survey techniques. Fathers initially took part in focus groups in December 2011, where they were invited to reflect on public perceptions of teenagers, and to share their experiences and support needs. These events were jointly organised by the researchers and support worker and followed up by three waves of individual qualitative interviews in 2011, again facilitated by the support worker. Subsequent one-to-one interviews were then conducted by a female researcher who explored various themes around fatherhood including, parenting, contact with children, relationship with the mother of the child, grandparental support, professional support, abortion and sex and relationship education. At each interview point, we asked the young fathers to complete self portraits, timelines (past, present and future) and relational maps to track changes and continuity in their lives over the course of the study (see Hanna and Lau-Clayton, 2012). Interviews with the young men ranged from 1-3 hours and were based at the University of Leeds.

The twelve fathers in the baseline sample were aged between 16 and 22 at the time of the first interview, and were at different stages of fatherhood. One was a soon-to-be father, while the rest had children ranging in age from 8 weeks to 6 years. In ten cases the fathers were under the age of 16 when their child was conceived. Three young men were living with their children; one child lived with temporary carers and in the remaining 8 cases, children resided with the mother. In all but one instance the fathers were from disadvantaged and often chaotic backgrounds. It was common for these young men to talk in terms of family 'troubles', ranging from incidents of parental drug addiction, prison sentences, mental health problems and physical abuse, to frequent changes of

abode, periods in social care, and tenuous or volatile relationships with their families of origin and others in their social networks. The young men themselves were often troubled during their upbringing, describing anger management problems, dangerous activities, involvement with the police and disengagement from school (see Neale and Lau Clayton, 2011 for further details).

Researcher-participant relationship: Thoughts and considerations

In terms of research approach, a large amount of data was gathered from two focus groups and over thirty individual interviews. One to one interviews in particular provided a great insight into the lives of young fathers and their support needs. Arguably the creation of a safe and non-judgemental environment was vital in making the young men feel comfortable and relaxed enough to discuss their feelings and experiences. The trust and rapport that was built between the researcher and the researched was also pivotal in ensuring an open and honest dialogue. As Punch (2002) suggested, the interaction between researchers and participants is crucial in data gathering. The young fathers suggested that the interviews were enjoyable encounters where they had space to 'take stock' and reflect on their lives. As Dave (aged 21) suggested:

“I like coming, like coming to speak to you and stuff like that. And seeing how things have changed since then [last interview].”

Often the interviews explored private and sensitive issues, such as the conception of the pregnancy, abortion choices and awareness of sexual health matters. Many of the young fathers also raised personal issues which had not been discussed with those closest to them, including their partners, family and friends. Young fathers did not want to disclose such matters due to strong ideas surrounding the important display of a capable and unemotional masculine bravado to others, and also to “protect” those closest to them. As a result, the FF interviews were seen as an opportunity for young fathers to let their guard down and to confide in the researcher. This included anxieties and fears about parenthood, losing contact with children, major shifts in family relationships and relationship breakdown with partners/ ex-partners. Speaking openly to the researcher seemed to alleviate some of the stress that fathers felt. As Scott (aged 16) suggested:

“I’ve enjoyed it [interviews], like coming and talking about it. Cause you don’t get chance to. It just feels good to like speak about it, get it all out of the way. I feel more relaxed and better than I did before.”

Although the young men’s ability to speak in an open manner was welcomed in terms of data accumulation and the depth of accounts, the sharing of such private life stories and the level of disclosure to the researcher had the potential to transfer the role of the researcher from an interviewer to a close acquaintance. As Yow (1995) suggested, narrators are inclined to feel close to someone who has listened understandingly, and they begin to think of the interviewer as a friend. Such feelings could be further compounded when young fathers lacked appropriate support outlets in their day to day lives. For example, Hutchinson, Wilson and Wilson (1994) identified qualitative interviews as being catharsis, and allowing self acknowledgment, sense of purpose, self-awareness, empowerment and healing, which could increase the interviewee’s positive feelings towards the researcher. As Alex (aged 16) suggested:

“Whatever I need to talk about I can just talk about. I mean you’re not a stranger but you are a stranger. So I can just say whatever really. . . It feels like you actually listen. I don’t know if you are listening but it does feel like you’re listening. So I like it better. It’s better than talking to a counsellor, let’s put it that way.”

The provision of supportive help may also develop from this relationship. For example, one young participant repeatedly expressed the wish to enter higher education, but had no knowledge of how to do so. After consulting with the team and the practitioner gatekeeper, the researcher adopted the stance of ‘friendly professional’ to advise the young man, and, as a result he enrolled on a full time degree programme. The risk of influencing the life chances of this participant – a central focus of this research - was over-ridden by the ethical need to provide appropriate support as part of an ongoing research relationship. As Neale and Hanna (2012) suggested, the potential drawback of influencing participants’ experiences of welfare was outweighed by the ethics of developing a degree of personal involvement and trust, which helped to sustain supportive research relationships.

Nevertheless, it was acknowledged early on by the FF interviewer that any interpretation of the interviewer solely as a friend or as an adviser throughout the study may be detrimental to the young fathers' long term support plans. For example, if young fathers became overly reliant upon the interview encounters to "let off steam" and only confided in the researcher, the young men may not approach and utilise the help that is available to them through family, friends or professional agencies. In order to minimise the possibility of the participants becoming overly reliant upon the researcher, several mechanisms were employed to remind participants of the purpose of the research and the role of the interviewer. This included the choice of the research site and interview protocol.

Regarding the research location, the interviews were conducted at the University of Leeds. Although this was partly due to the participant's convenience and the ethical safety of the female researcher, the location also provided a clear and visual indicator to the participants that the meetings were not an informal get together occurring by chance or between friends, but instead, the interviews were arranged to serve a purpose for the research team (to investigate young fatherhood) and the participant (to share their experiences of young fatherhood). The use of one of the department's meeting room provided further reminders to both parties. This proved to be quite effective, as young fathers were often quite inquisitive about the university and the experience of higher education, thus reminding them of their surroundings and the purpose of the meeting. As such, consideration of the interview site should not just be for practical reasons, but also its role in reminding participants about the nature of their involvement in a study.

During the interview itself, the researcher began each discussion with the same protocol to ensure a professional and pleasant start to the interview, in addition to clarifying any issues and to answer young father's questions. The protocol included the thanking of participants for their time and help with the research, obtaining ongoing consent for the interviews, seeking permission to record the discussion, outlining the interview topics and providing the interviewee with the opportunity to ask any questions or to withdraw from the study. Care was also taken over the level of formality and familiarity displayed by the researcher before, during and after the meeting. For example, the researcher was friendly in their approach but not over friendly or overly familiar with the young fathers to allow a professional distance between the two parties. During the interview itself, visual clues such as the Dictaphone on the table and the visibility of the interview guides were also

reminders about the nature of the meeting between the researcher and the researched. At the end of the interview, participants were thanked and informed of the next part of the project, such as dates for further meetings or dissemination plans and given their gift vouchers as a token of thanks for their involvement and time. Although such practices may seem common sense, Yow (1995) has argued that researchers are obligated to indicate the professional nature of the interviewer and interviewee's relationship.

It is worth noting that the 'hard to reach' nature of the sample meant that reaching and communicating with young fathers was often very difficult and conventional social conventions regarding acceptable hours of contact were not adhered to. The main method of getting in touch with participants was via mobile phone text messages. Young fathers were known to send general questions and text replies to the researcher out of office hours and sometimes quite late into the evening. The researcher was aware that contact with the young men were infrequent and difficult, as such, despite the timing of their texts, replies were made to the fathers in order to arrange, confirm or re-arrange interviews as well as answering questions. Young fathers were known to change their plans with the researcher at the last minute, to change their mobile phone numbers without warning, to lose mobile phones and often had no credit to reply to the researcher's original text message, so any contact that the young men had initiated required a swift response. Such conditions are not ideal, and as Hemmerman (2010) suggested, setting and maintaining ethical boundaries are heightened when working with hard-to-reach and vulnerable participants. With such considerations in mind, the researcher was very careful with the wording and formatting of replies to ensure that professional boundaries remained intact. This included the use of Standard English in text messages (not text speech), references to the research project or the university during the conversation, and a formal thank you and signing off at the end of the reply. Although some fathers would engage in several text messages as part of the conversation, with some pleasantries made by both parties, the purpose of the communication and the role of the researcher were maintained by ensuring that replies were responsive yet professional.

At the time of the fieldwork, FF was planned to run for 18 months. Although the study has since received ESRC funding to continue for another three years (grant reference ES/J022993/1), the ending of the project needed careful consideration, especially given the vulnerable nature of this group and the depth of young father's accounts within the interviews. When engaging and speaking

to young fathers over a period of time, the level of personal involvement between the researcher and the participants inevitably increases and young fathers may not only feel more relaxed with the interviewing process but also with the interviewer. Clearly the management of these relationships over time requires consideration of how to maintain professional boundaries (Hemmerman, 2010). One suggestion by Patrick (2012) was to avoid regular forms of contact on which the participant might come to rely, which was adhered to in FF by careful timing and systematic organisation and conduct of the interviews. Keeping young fathers up-to-date with the timescale of FF and the potential ending of the project also ensured that participants understood that contact with the researcher would cease when the project ended.

In relation to the end of fieldwork, De Laine (2000) pointed out that some participants can feel betrayed, exploited and disappointed when a project ends, so it was necessary to be mindful of such issues, and how these feelings can be prevented through professional research conduct in FF. By drawing upon and reminding participants of the professional nature of the interview meetings and the status of the relationship between them and the researcher within interview encounters and during text communications, this was hoped to clarify the roles of both parties in the project and be supportive of a successful and un-traumatic ending of the study. Although FF will now be funded for a further three years, the opportunity to debrief participants was envisaged at the end of fieldwork, with sensitive assessments of young father's well being at the time and recommended professional support if necessary. As Cohen and colleagues (2007, p.186) commented, one has to consider the after effects of leaving the field and to take care that no one is harmed or worse off from the research. Clearly participants cannot be simply used for research purposes and then be thrown to one side once the study has finished, especially when researching young and vulnerable groups such as young fathers. Leaving the field with good relationships and the participant's well-being intact is also particularly pertinent for longitudinal studies when researchers wish to return to their original sample. Perhaps a model of 'care and reuse' of the sample would be more helpfully applied within QL enquires rather than a 'use and abuse' approach to samples in some research.

Conclusion

Ethical considerations can be magnified in QL research, as researchers and participants often build high levels of trust and rapport in their relationship with one another over the life course of a study. Within FF clear expectations of the roles of the researcher and the participant helped to minimise any blurring of the boundaries within this relationship. Such clarifications were also seen to minimise any trauma or ill-feeling from the participants at the end of the fieldwork.

It is hoped that this reflection of the participant-researcher relationship within the FF study has offered some insight into ethics within QL research and will help to promote reflection and best practice by other investigators. As Batchelor and Briggs (1994) have commented, failure to address ethical issues results from researchers who are ill-prepared to cope with the unpredictable nature of qualitative research. Arguably, preparation and full consideration of ethical issues is key to any type of research, but significantly more so within QL approaches.

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