Power, agency and participatory agendas: A critical exploration of young people’s engagement in participative qualitative research

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Abstract
This article critically explores data generated within a participatory research project with young people in the care of a local authority, the (Extra)ordinary Lives project. The project involved ethnographic multi-media data generation methods used in groups and individually with eight participants (aged 10–20) over a school year and encouraged critical reflexive practices throughout. The article problematizes aspects of power, ethics and agency in participatory research from poststructural perspectives and cautions against the assumption that participatory research per se necessarily produces ‘better’ research data, equalizes power relations or enhances ethical integrity. Yet, throughout the article, there are examples of the potential contributions and challenges of participatory methodologies.

Keywords
children, participatory research, power, qualitative methods, young people

Introduction
In this article we report on research which, like many other studies, assumed that participation was a positive ethical and political framework for approaching research with children. However, an explicit aim of the research was to critically examine the processes, challenges and opportunities of overtly participative research and this article is an attempt to do this. In the article we join with others in critiquing the notion that research which aims to be participative is necessarily more enabling for participants, is ethically or morally superior to other types of research or produces ‘better’ research. Nonetheless, we argue that participatory research can make a central contribution, in providing an ethical,
epistemological and political framework and in the potential for rich ‘findings’. An analysis of participation can potentially examine micro-exchanges between adults and children, between children and between adults, all of which foreground issues of power relations. In what follows we briefly review recent debates about participation in society and in research and analyse how power relations are conceptualized in this literature. We then describe the (Extra)ordinary Lives research study and analyse the interplay between participation and the project’s processes and outcomes.

**Problematizing participation in research with children and young people**

The impetus for an increased use of participative research is in the ‘rights’ agenda of the last two decades in particular, which has been well documented elsewhere (Freeman, 2007). The right of children to participate in decisions that affect them (Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC]) gives political and quasi-legal strength to the promotion of research which directly engages with children. Participation in research appears to be fairly broadly conceptualized, and four main forms can be distinguished. First, some research appears to be described as participatory simply because children are invited to be participants, but where all other aspects of the research have been designed and directed by the researcher (e.g. traditional semi-structured interviews, questionnaires or rating scales; see Fernandez, 2007). Second, others aim to enable children’s views to be expressed through ‘child-centred’ forms of communication such as play, art, drama, games and photography. There are numerous examples of this, including Clark (2001). Third, some (including the research reported in this article) involve children in research about aspects of their own lives and encourage participants to have some impact on aspects of the research process, such as research design, analysis or dissemination (see also Warming, 2006). Fourth, some research centres train children in formal social research methods, in order for them to carry out research into other people’s lives, concerning topics that they have identified as of interest to them (e.g. Kellett et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2002). There is often overlap in aims and means between the last three groups.

An extensive literature is developing that debates, critiques and theorizes the impetus towards more participation of children and young people in public policy and community initiatives (Thomas, 2007). Debates centre on issues of who participates, how they participate and the relationship between process and outcome. It might, indeed, be argued that as academics we are more equipped or willing to critique participation in policy-making than in academic research. In particular, the criticism that participatory approaches tend to place more emphasis on process rather than impacts might be seen to be applied to participatory research. While some have claimed that children’s involvement in research produces better, or at least different data (Smith et al., 2002), this has not been systematically evidenced.

Gallagher and Gallagher (2008) present a challenge to the perhaps too cosy assumptions in childhood and social work research that imply, at times, that participatory research is unquestionably good, even better than other forms of research. They note that while most participatory research with children is labelled as ‘empowering’, much is in
fact highly managed by researchers, with children, for example, instructed on exactly how many photographs to take, and of what subjects. Other methods derive from institutionalized practices in schools (such as worksheets), relying on children’s ‘schooled docility’ for their participation. Much ‘innovative’ participatory research is simply a form or extension of the long-established traditions of ethnographic research. These authors are not arguing that any of these examples are ‘wrong’ but baulk at them being privileged as in some way ‘better’ than other research.

Thomson (2007), too, challenges some of the assumptions of the participatory research literature, continuing the debate as to whether children need special or different methods from research with adults (Punch, 2002). Thomson argues that, apart from legal differences around consent, a participatory approach applies to children and adults, with individuals across the age span needing flexibility in approach to accommodate different levels of concentration, positions of marginalization and so on. She sees herself as a participatory researcher who happens to be working with children, rather than a children’s researcher who is ‘using’ participatory tools. Indeed, she draws on poststructuralist perspectives to theorize both children and adults as human ‘becomings’ whose identities are performative and relational, attempting to move on from a simplistic and static duality (Prout, 2005) that works to separate children, as powerless and dependent, from adults, as powerful and independent. While Thomson’s and Gallagher and Gallagher’s papers come from, and reach, different positions (in that Thomson appears to be arguing that the participatory paradigm is indeed a ‘better’ form of research), both papers are noting that participation is much more about methodological understandings of research than about specific ‘techniques’ or methods.

Partial participations, bounded agency and power

Foregrounding children’s conceptual autonomy (Thorne, 1980) and locating children as active social agents via participatory methods to facilitate children’s ‘voice’, ‘agency’ and ‘empowerment’ have been highly influential in the early wave of childhood research. Agency, empowerment and voice, however, have become contested concepts within contemporary studies of children and childhood (see Gallagher, 2008a; Prout, 2005). In many of the discussions surrounding the limitations and possibilities of conducting participatory research, there is a tendency to theorize agency and power almost as attributes that children can ‘have’ and that are enabled, promoted or ‘given’ by the adult researcher’ (Grover, 2004). For us, power in child–adult relations is theorized as both a productive and repressive force (Foucault, 1977; Gallagher, 2008a, 2008b). It can operate to constrain and empower in different sociocultural contexts. Most importantly, it is not something that exists ‘out there’ but always in relation as a social and discursive phenomenon.

However, in much of the childhood literature, power is frequently conceptualized as always already repressive and as something that can be ‘known’ by the researcher. Even more nuanced accounts, that acknowledge both the fixity and fluidity of power relations in the researcher–researched relationship, continue, like Benhabib’s (1992) notion of ‘symmetrical reciprocity’, to desire ‘equality’ between self (researcher) and other (child). However, as Christensen and Prout (2002) note, there will always be commonalities and
difference, symmetries and asymmetries which will shift and change according to context, culture and particular (historical) moments. As Edwards and Mauthner (2002: 27) highlight, ‘rather than ignoring or blurring power positions, ethical practice needs to pay attention to them’.

Critically exploring and thus ‘paying attention’ to the ways in which power relations shape, mediate and transform research relationships in the research process is central to our notion of participatory research. We conceptualize ‘power’ as dynamic and relational, shifting away from the dichotomous view of power where the researcher always already embodies ‘power’ and the research participant always already embodies ‘powerlessness’. It is not our intention to overcome such binaries but rather to understand their ‘between-ness’ and relationality, co-dependence and constitutive force (via a nexus of power relations), although in ways we might not always anticipate or expect. In doing so, we do not wish to underestimate the operationalization of power relations in most research settings which enables adults to have much more freedom to direct the process than children do.

The (Extra)ordinary Lives project

(Extra)ordinary Lives was a demonstrator project within Cardiff University’s qualitative node of the Economic and Social Research Council’s National Centre for Research Methods. It aimed to explore the ordinary, everyday lives of young people who are looked after by the local authority in foster, residential or kinship care. The research design was intentionally participatory, with a range of means and media for generating data being made available to young people (including camcorders, digital cameras, diaries, scrapbooks, interviews and group and individual ethnographic conversations). The young people were invited to take part in fortnightly ‘me, myself and I’ project sessions, where they could explore any aspect of their everyday lives using any combination of methods and media. One-to-one contact also took place in-between the group sessions, by arrangement. During the group sessions, young people worked on their own individual projects, but also engaged in much interaction and socializing. Therefore, while the sessions were not formally group discussions or focus groups, interactions between young people and with the researchers had an impact on the data produced. The performative and intersubjective nature of the research relationships and thus the co-production of data is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail, but is drawn out briefly in the sections that follow. Individual research encounters varied in form. Time was spent together during car journeys between their homes and in the project sessions, encounters which young people could choose to record using digital audio-recorders. Other research encounters included young people taking researchers on (videoed and/or audio-recorded) walking or driving tours of current or former localities; and conversations in their homes (see Ross et al., 2009).

The research was originally conceived of as involving a sample of about 15–20 young people, some of whom might only wish to take part in a small number of sessions. We hoped that a small number would take part for a school year, to enable a longitudinal aspect to the study. Of the original nine young people who showed an early interest in the
project, eight continued participating for the entire school year of 2006–7, and continued their involvement into 2008 by taking part in analysis and dissemination, as is described in this article. The intense nature of the data generation meant that the research team eventually decided to recruit no further participants to the project. There are therefore rich, longitudinal data relating to a small group of eight young people, of whom six were girls and young women. They were aged 10–20 at the time of fieldwork, all are ethnically white and from one local area. They include two care leavers, one of whom was still living with former foster carers, three young people in kinship care and three in foster care. Two of the young people had previous experience of residential care. All were referred by their social workers, a condition requested by the relevant local authority, and consent for participation was given by an adult with parental responsibility (for those under 16 years old) and the young people themselves, but no details of their care background were requested by the research team, ensuring that the young people had full control over the information flow.

Young people who are looked after are often subject to fixed categorization and an official ‘gaze’ at intimate aspects of their lives, with categories such as ‘self care’ and ‘identity’ discussed at events such as review meetings and care proceedings. Ethically, we did not want to intensify this scrutiny by predetermining the areas of their lives that the young people should explore during the project. A participative approach therefore was part of an ethical framework that aimed to encourage reflexive self-definition by the participants, and thus our main substantive research question was deliberately broad to enable the young people to take a lead in choosing which aspects of their lives they wished to explore. We were interested in young people’s everyday relationship cultures and identities in different contexts and how they manage and negotiate these within and beyond their positioning as children in care. We were aware of the potential irony of initiating further research with young people we had identified as over-scrutinized. Nonetheless, we noted that because this scrutiny was often within the parameters of fixed categories and measures, our understanding of these young people’s meaning making and everyday experiences was extremely limited. Therefore, while the methodological questions in the research design could have been explored with almost any group of participants, we hoped that this research design might prove particularly fruitful with young people in this particular social location.

The project was explained to potential participants through a set of accessible information leaflets and a DVD, which explained both the purpose of the project and the potential data generation methods. As this excerpt demonstrates, in these our aims were overt:

*Why are we doing this?*

As researchers, we found that what gets written about ‘looked-after’ children and young people only shows parts of their lives.

Often it either tended to be the ‘bad bits’ or the bits which mattered to adults rather than young people themselves.
With this project, we want to offer you the chance to express your lives and your selves on what matters to you and in the ways that you want.

We hope that what you decide to share with us and with others will make a difference to how people think and make decisions about ‘looked-after’ children and young people.

We also hope that you get to do activities (like film-making) that you might not have done before.

Most of all, we hope you will enjoy being part of a project like this one.

Thus, while it can be argued that in setting up this project we have reinforced these children’s categorization as ‘in care’, we have tried to problematize this category in how we present the project to the potential participants. Interestingly, more than one of our participants resisted this ‘problematization’, with one young women remarking that being in care was the most important influence on her life and we should not underestimate its impact.

Methodologically, we wished to explore the ethical and analytical issues raised and challenged by enabling young participants to choose and define their own means of representation. To this end, the researchers undertook an ethnographic study of this participatory research project, keeping full field notes and taping research meetings, in order to research the participatory method, as well as the substantive findings. Analysis was carried out initially on an individual basis, paying close attention to the social and cultural context in which data are produced (e.g. participant-generated video-diaries through to researcher–participant ‘talk’). Themes relating to each young person’s everyday life were generated and shared and then developed with the young person. Data were then coded according to these themes and cross-‘case’ analysis was carried out with the use of Atlas ti (qualitative analysis software) to further develop the substantive and theoretical themes that emerged from the individual analyses. The intention was not to make generalizations about the lives of young people who are looked after (and the size of the sample does not allow for this). Our intention was to gain a complex understanding of how these young people’s subjectivities are articulated, developed and enacted in their everyday lives, and to further develop an understanding of the ethics and power relations embedded in the workings of participative, longitudinal research. The richness of the data obtained allows a rare opportunity to do so.

‘Does your head in, don’t it?’: shared encounters and the complexities of individual and group data generation

In this section we discuss aspects of our engagement with the young people in the research and the means by which the young people generated data about themselves. Here, a less directive approach is taken by researchers than in more managed forms of participative research. Each young person developed their own relationship to and thus engagement with modes of data generation, but in general young people tended to share more intimate experiences or personal perspectives when alone with a researcher, or used a particular medium to communicate those experiences to us. Communicating while on the move, walking together or travelling together in the car, was preferred by some of the young
people. Visual data, such as scores of photographs and videos, mainly generated by the young people independently, gave rich insights into their everyday routines, material worlds, relationships and sense of self (Renold and Ross, 2008). One young person made two hour-long videos providing us with an edited and commented-upon account of her experiences of being in care, contrasting her birth family with her foster family and the multiple subcultures that typified her peer relations (see Renold, 2010; Ringrose and Renold, forthcoming). The fun and socializing quality of the fortnightly group sessions generated and consolidated a range of group dynamics, and at times generated data in expected and unexpected ways. Young people usually attended the project straight from school, and were sometimes voluble about a particular encounter or experience of that day. This might lead other young people to share similar experiences. The following extract is taken from a recording of a conversation during a car journey and illustrates how one young person describing an argument about her care status in school led to another older participant to reminisce about a similar experience:

Keely: She went ‘no wonder you’re in care because probably none of your family wanted you’ and I goes ‘get a life you bitch I put myself in care’. I was like ‘so don’t talk to me like I, they didn’t want me because actually I put myself in care so get’. She went ‘Yeah but according to um’ because someone told them she knows about me somehow she went, ‘someone told me you’re on voluntary care’, which means your mother or your father can take you out whenever you want. I was like that (gestures) and ‘what?’ I went ‘actually it’s only my mother’ and I went ‘I wouldn’t even go back to my mother anyway’ (goes on to describe physical fight which then developed)

Jolene: I remember when I was at school /

(Keely cuts over her and continues describing fight at some length, researcher asks Keely how the other young people knew about voluntary care and Jolene says that in a high school word travels fast. Keely explains that another pupil has been in voluntary care, so the others may know about the system through this.)

Jolene: My foster brothers and sisters used to make comments like that all the time about my family . . . Yeah, a lot of dick heads when they start going. A girl in school she used to be my best friend till we had an argument and she said ‘at least my mother loves me’ I never hit her, someone so hard in my life

Keely: Does your head in, don’t it?

Data generation evolved through young people’s patterns of talking and recording. This was often on the move, in short bursts, and in fast-moving conversations that switched between personal experiences and discussions of popular culture, often punctuated by technologies such as texting and listening to bursts of music, rather than a predetermined plan or direct questioning. The type of data generation that evolved, moving across different spaces, and visual data, affected the ‘findings’ with insights into, among other things, how young people used space, identified with places and the interactions between body image and identity. An example of this would be that as well as hearing Keely’s account above of her interactions with peers in school, we were able to observe her multiple presentations of self such as: her apparent enjoyment of the researcher’s nursery rhymes CD; the way she would rapidly switch to loud ‘cool’ music when driving
through a ‘hard’ housing estate or being picked up from school; her physical and verbal dominance with other young people; and her rather cowed ‘good’ self with her foster carer. One boy produced a photographic diary which consisted entirely of pictures from a book in his room. It transpired that he had been grounded for most of that week and the pictures are starkly illustrative of this. Thus, despite the fact that we created a social setting for the research, in the interactions around, between and within the formal group meetings, we obtained some sense of our participants’ ordinary everyday lives. The ‘everyday’ issues in their lives unfolded due to the regular meetings over time, which meant that immediate experiences could be shared. When we, from time to time, attempted some more formal participatory ‘techniques’ (such as a group discussion evaluating the research towards the end of the project), these were less successful at generating data than more free-flowing, unplanned data generation techniques that mimicked more closely the young people’s everyday means of communication.

The risk of having such an informal research setting, with a clear aim that the young people should also gain from the experience through new and fun activities, is that the participants may feel a sense of obligation to ‘provide’ data through a combination of motivations. These might include wishing to please researchers with whom they have built a positive relationship, a desire to continue to receive positive experiences or rewards, or as a result of their social position as often marginalized and scrutinized individuals. While it is possible that such processes were at work in our project, we found that as the research and group relationships developed, the young people (metaphorically and sometimes literally) ‘kicked off their shoes’ and appeared confident about directing the management of ‘their’ data. One clear example of this relates to the participation of one 10-year-old boy, who through a series of discussions with the research team clearly indicated that he did not wish any films, photographs or verbal data that he produced to be used as part of the data set, and we have respected this wish. Despite this, he continued his involvement throughout the project, stating that he just wished to come along, run around and eat the food. He appeared to have no sense of obligation to become a research subject in return for rewards. Similarly, a 13-year-old girl would go through the voluminous data set of visual and other material she had developed, stating what we could ‘use’ and what was private (see Renold et al. [2008] for a fuller discussion). We do not, however, exclude the possibility that some of the young people’s involvement was driven by complex desires to please, have fun and to enable others to understand some aspects of their lives. It is possible that we have found it easier to notice the instances when they have rejected a sense of obligation to the researchers than those where they have felt the need to oblige. An informal, participative setting brings both risks and benefits in these areas.

Disrupting the normative generational power relations during research activities wasn’t too onerous; for example, with many of our participants displaying more knowledge than the researchers of their local areas and of technology. We did, however, need to think creatively at working to disrupt some of the power imbalances between young people. Indeed, the ability of some young people to contribute could be impeded by being talked over by dominant group members. The silencing of others occurred through various intersections of physical, cultural and intellectual capital (e.g. age, gender), through the domination of space (e.g. movement and territorial occupation of places
within the centre) or sound (e.g. talking over). It is the last that the following extract illustrates, recorded in the car on the way to a climbing centre for an end-of-project treat. Here, it can be seen how Angel (aged 10) has little opportunity to develop her narrative about her holiday as she is constantly interrupted by Keely (aged 13):

Angel: I went climbing when I was on holiday/
Keely: I love climbing. Can I go first then and show ’em how it’s done? I love climbing
Angel: I was like a spider I was, I was the first one up there/
Jolene: Can you just all climb at the same time?
Keely: You can.
Emma: I’m not sure how they’re going to do it
Keely: You can, cause like when I went (inaudible) . . . can you belay,3 can you belay, can any of you belay (continue to talk over each other)

While we learn little here substantively about Angel’s spider-like skill at climbing, this episode did give us some insights into the social and cultural hierarchies operating between Angel and Keely. A further risk of giving little direction to participants of how to generate data was that potentially little of what was generated would relate to our core substantive research questions (e.g. those that foregrounded risk and marginalization, categorization and positioning as ‘looked after’ and family and belonging). A developing group culture of ‘mucking about’, playing, even fighting, began to take precedence when the group met together, sometimes leading the research team to question the integrity of the methodology, particularly in terms of participatory methods as ethical enterprise (Skelton, 2008). Yet, on listening back to digital-recordings of the group meetings, it became clear that just spending time together enabled relationship building between the participants, and with the researchers, which provided a base for micro-moments when the research as a method would become part of the conversation, or invaluable discussions took place about the young people’s perceptions of their everyday lives. Therefore, we would tentatively conclude that this participative method was a strength for data generation with this group of young people, for our particular substantive aim of exploring everyday relationship cultures. Nonetheless, we recognize that not only is this a resource-intensive method, its unstructured nature could restrict participation for some participants in some group situations, and may risk a sense of obligation on the part of the participants. The next section takes a critical look at our attempts to involve the young people in analysis.

‘I think family’s the big one’: analysis as ongoing process and discrete research activity

Participatory analysis might be conceived as engaging in informal interactions such as following up events or feelings and sharing emerging themes (e.g. Thomas and O’Kane, 1998), or as a more formal ‘stage’ of the research process where participants are overtly engaged in analysis as a defined research activity, perhaps with training in methods of analysis (Kellett et al., 2004). To formally ‘train’ the young people in our study in qualitative analysis would not have fitted with either the original intentions of the study,
to enable young people to develop their own ways of exploring their lives, nor our experiences of data generation, which saw resistance to formalized sessions from all but the two oldest participants. We therefore experimented with both analysis as ongoing process and analysis as discrete activity, both of which would be strongly individualized and interconnected with the modes of expression and engagement of young people’s own cultures of participation.

Each of the young people were shown the key themes that we had drawn out from our initial analysis of their individual data, following the main stage of fieldwork. This was done using diagrams and photographs, verbally or in a written form depending on the participant. Responses, as with all stages in the project, varied from intense interest, even excitement and engagement in discussion, to brief interest and discussion, to a fairly disinterested passive response of assent to the themes but no real engagement in discussion (from the youngest member). While we achieved an ethical goal of transparency and continued engagement with participants through this process, it is questionable as to how much this particular participatory aspect has deepened our understanding of most of the young people’s lives (Nevaeh, age 17, was an exception to this). Instead, our analysis has been deepened by ongoing discussions and returning to themes throughout our engagement with the young people, from the first meeting. This has the advantage of responding to the young people’s cultural forms of communication (informally and in short bursts) but the disadvantage of being less transparent as a research process.

A key hurdle in engaging young people in analysis was confidentiality. In this project, although some data generation took place in shared spaces, several young people shared personal experiences when alone with a single researcher. We considered it therefore unethical to engage young people in analysing each other’s data and we chose to only engage young people in looking at the themes emerging from their own data. This meant that young people could not be involved in identifying the connections (and disconnections) between the young people’s experiences. It also had implications for disseminating events involving our participants. We found that we had to restrict the use of some material as participants might be able to identify each other’s data, some of which was intimate and personal (see Wiles et al. [2008] for a brief overview). There is also the issue that what may be endlessly fascinating to social scientists might be dull or too challenging (emotionally or intellectually) for young people, or indeed any lay participants. We made transcripts of conversations available to young people, to make transparent the research process and to enable ongoing analysis talk. Several young people were quickly bored at reading such a mass of words, although they enjoyed remembering funny or unusual things they had said. One young woman who had recalled some painful thoughts relating to self-image appeared uncomfortable at seeing her own words written down. As throughout the project, we found it better to adapt to the young people’s way of conversing, such as saying informally that we had been reading a transcript or field note and could we chat about this further? Instead of reading transcripts, Angel (age 10) would record our conversation for half of the journey from her home to the project and then listen back to what she had said for the second half of the journey. Thus, more immediate or informal involvement of the participants worked better than imposing on the young people our own forms of ‘doing research’.
For some of our participants, as the field notes from an ‘analysis’ meeting with Michael, aged 13, reveal, meeting up 6 months after the main fieldwork stage allowed the researcher an opportunity to explore again with Michael his understanding that he had been part of a research project and to check out (again) his individually negotiated level of consent to our use of data:

As we watched the videos I chatted through some of the themes that tied in with the bits that we were watching, showing him the diagram I’d made and chatted about how we’d come up with the themes through watching his videos and from reading the notes that we wrote up. . . . He understood all of this and said again that he didn’t like being recorded but that it was ok for us to make up the notes and share them with each other. (Nicola: researcher, field notes, 30 January 2008)

Nevaeh, a care leaver, was one of the few participants who engaged in a sustained conversation about how we were beginning to understand the data she had generated. This led to her expanding on and clarifying many of the themes (from bullying and body image and the social stigma of being ‘in care’ to contradictory feelings of love, violence and belonging in family and partner relationships). The following data excerpts follow up different analytic trails around the notion of belonging. The first pivots on the theme of the interior design ‘make-over’ which was a returning topic and shared interest between Emma (researcher) and Nevaeh, resulting in pages of ‘make-over’ talk about current and future DIY (‘do-it-yourself’) projects. Here, Emma introduces the theme in ways that connect Nevaeh’s passion for DIY with her history and desire for creating her ‘own place’. The second extract foregrounds Nevaeh’s emphasis of the themes of family (having her ‘own family’) and the complexities of belonging:

**Emma:** So that was a theme that we thought was coming out of your talk when you talked about what had gone on over the last kind of four years and moving to your flat.
**Nevaeh:** Oh that’s nice, yeah.
**Emma:** So I don’t know what you think about that –
**Nevaeh:** No, yeah, that’s nice.
**Emma:** If you think, no, that’s nonsense actually that’s not true (laughs). Or if you think –
**Nevaeh:** No, but that does make sense, I’ve never thought of it like that . . .
**Nevaeh:** I think family’s the big one.
**Emma:** Family’s a big one. So something about the family, you think.
**Nevaeh:** I’ve got my own family now. And then like belonging.
**Emma:** Belonging. Yep, yep, OK.
**Nevaeh:** Yeah.
**Emma:** Cause that was a big, that is one of our big themes/
**Nevaeh:** It’s mad, like seeing it all . . . like . . . that’s you.

. . .

**Nevaeh:** Yeah. It makes a lot of sense though, that. Seeing it like that, each little path made a lot of sense you know . . . but trying to put it all together – it’s hard.
**Emma:** Mmm (nodding in agreement).
Towards the end of this excerpt, Nevaeh reminds us that there is no coherent summary or singular interpretation of someone else’s life. Much of the conversation pivots between a mutual sharing of what is emerging as significant analytic themes, with a shared acknowledgement of the complex task of representing her story conceptually through analytic themes. With in-depth exploration of a small sample, in this project we are able to illuminate the complexities and sometimes messy contradictions of individual lives, accounts which will not lend themselves to neat, generalizable ‘findings’ about young people in care, but case studies which offer up rich theoretical insights and avenues for future substantive research (see Holland et al., 2010).

In relation to contemporary debates over ‘voice’ within contemporary childhood studies it is important to ask what we are doing when we ask young people to contribute to qualitative analysis. If we accept that the participants are contributing to the analysis, rather than dictating it, and offering one of many multiple interpretations, we are then foregrounding how children’s experiences are one (important) part of a complex whole. For example, in a later conversation in the same analysis session Nevaeh began to talk about her desire to ‘just be normal’, which the researcher then connected up with (and continued to discuss with Nevaeh) the multiple interior design make-overs she has routinely conducted in each flat she has lived in over the last two years. This theme has since been explored in a paper around compulsory reflexivity as survivability for children in care (Renold, 2007, 2010), of which a significant component involves attending to the performative and affective dimension of research relationships and thus the politics of what it means to generate and communicate the stories of others and the psychosocial problematic of ‘whose story’ gets represented (Skeggs, 2002). If one acknowledges the inseparability of researcher and participant and the ways in which ‘the researcher is both written into and writes the story’ (Walkerdine et al., 2002: 181), the issue of voice (and whose voice) is further complicated. There is no simple resolution to this, except exploration through reflexive techniques which attend to power relations and ethics, reciprocity and responsibility (Skeggs, 2002).

The generation of research themes as a collaborative and intersubjective practice complicates the notion of any singular notion of truth or validity claims, or what Krimmerman (2001: 70) calls ‘epistemic privilege’: that is, privileging the ‘voices’ of marginalized groups (e.g. women who are survivors of domestic abuse). We agree that because some voices are more often excluded from the public arena than others, then there is justification in giving them an ‘epistemic advantage’ by enabling their voices to be heard. As Skeggs (2002: 130) argues, ‘if subaltern groups have no access to the mechanisms and circuits for telling and distributing their knowledge, how do others even know they exist?’ However, we do feel that there is a real risk that children’s analyses are heralded as of superior authenticity in understanding children’s lives, than that of others involved in their lives, or indeed of social scientists who place qualitative data in the wider sociostructural, sociocultural or psychosocial context. These are long and fraught debates, for those of us who are familiar with feminist, postcolonial or critical ethnographic traditions.

From our perspective, we feel that at times the literature on involving children in analysis suggests that it is unquestionably a ‘good thing’. We would agree that there are many advantages to such involvement, including a potential enrichment of our understanding of children’s lives, and an ethical-political impetus to engage children
throughout the research process rather than just as providers of data. However, we have outlined in this section the problematics of voice, authenticity and representation. We also noted how, in our project, formal engagement in analysis, while having the advantage of transparent ‘participation’, fitted less well with young people’s cultures of communication and participation than continual analytical talk throughout the project.

**Conclusion**

In this article we have noted the flourishing culture of participative research with children and the emerging debates about its uniqueness and efficacy. Some have expressed concern that the struggle to deliver participatory aims and objectives leaves a bad ethical taste in the mouth when ‘participants’ become ‘reluctant respondents’ (Birch and Miller, 2002) or question our participatory aims. As Birch and Miller have argued in relation to feminist research:

> This raises the ethical concern of how far participation in any fully participatory sense is actually desired by those we research and how far we may be imposing a particular relationship on those who we seek data from. (Birch and Miller, 2002: 100)

Indeed, given the weak empirical base of what children think and feel about being involved in participatory research (Hill, 2006), the drive for participatory methodologies suddenly doesn’t seem very ‘participatory’! Taking these experiences on board, the (Extra) ordinary Lives project was established specifically to scrutinize what it means to undertake participatory research with a small group of young people and, moreover, young people whose lives were frequently lived on the structural and social margins of society. In doing so, issues of power, agency and researcher reflexivity have been central.

We have discussed how the children in our project developed their own ways of participating, how we were not adult ‘experts’ attempting to teach children how to research and instead tried to be collaborative and open to whatever aspect of research they wished to engage in. While working in groups as well as individually best mimicked the young people’s preferred modes of communication, and was potentially more empowering for young people who were able to have fun together, share common experiences and, as a group, hold sway over researchers’ presence, it did have ethical drawbacks. This included the risk that stronger voices sometimes drowned out quieter and younger group members and the implication that where participants knew each other’s identities (and pseudonyms) then they could identify each other’s personal data in analysis sessions. This lack of anonymity over personal data also meant that analysis of the entire data set by participants was ethically unviable, and participants could only analyse their own material. A further drawback of this design is that while it enabled the production of valuable data, it was extremely resource intensive for a small number of participants and therefore might be difficult or undesirable to replicate in its entirety.

In weighing up the advantages and drawbacks briefly summarized in the previous paragraph, we cautiously conclude that this type of participatory research is a valuable way to carry out research because it is based on a critical and reflexive ethical framework, supports the political impetus of children’s rights and can generate rich and
valuable data. However, we caution against the assumption that this approach necessarily produces ‘better’ research data and, indeed, if participants are fully involved in all dissemination there is a risk of portraying rather sanitized research results. We warn that researchers must anticipate ethical and practical implications and maintain a reflexive awareness of how power differences interplay in sometimes surprising ways. It is not the only way to conduct research with children and young people (whether ‘in care’ or any other social location), and we must not hide behind bland statements that research was participatory, without including in our analysis the theoretical framework in which the participation sits and how the participation has impacted on the claims made for, and from, the research.

We would argue that it is more important to pay close attention to how participation is enacted (at a range of levels, including participant–participant, participant–researchers, groups of participants–groups of workers, participants–end-users of research, including policy-makers and academic audiences) than to focus in on how much participation was achieved. Meaningful exchanges, where individuals and groups have choices in what they wish to share, with whom and in what way, would seem to be at least as important as ensuring that participatory mechanisms are in place, such as advisory groups. Ticking participatory boxes, in civic participation practice or in research, does not necessarily mean that participants experience the process as participatory, nor will it always affect the quality of research outputs.

Notes

1. All pseudonyms were chosen by the participants.
2. We do not make claims to uniqueness in conducting research which led to interactions such as these. Focus groups or group interviews can lead to similar circumstances where research participants generate discussion triggered by another participant’s input, that might otherwise have been. Similarly, ethnographic studies have long observed interactions between participants. Where our research design differs from ethnographic observation in ‘natural’ settings is that we have brought together participants who would not normally meet together, and it differs from focus groups in that there was little formal direction by researchers.
3. A climbing term.

References


