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Rights, 'right on' or the right thing to do? A critical exploration of young people's engagement in participative social work research

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## Introduction

This paper provides a detailed analysis of the participative processes of a research project with young people that was overtly 'participative' in its aim. In doing so it attempts to contribute to debates about participative research. In this paper 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'. We understand participative research with children and young people to mean that which involves participants in some of the *process* of research, such as question-setting, research design, ethical review, data generation, analysis or dissemination rather than simply *providing* data through more or less engaging methods. We understand participation as not being something just about children or about children in opposition to adults, but as part of a complex inter-subjective relationship between adults and children (where both adults and children are being encouraged to step outside normative generational roles). An analysis of participation can potentially examine micro-exchanges between adults and children, between children, and between adults, as well as a broader picture. In what follows we argue that, whilst the discipline of childhood studies has engaged critically with the notion of children's participation in society, there has been less critical discussion, and perhaps indeed some complacency, about the claims made for participatory research with children.

The early part of this paper will therefore review the current literature of participation, particularly in relation to children and research. In doing so we detect three lines of argument that we have identified as 'rights', 'right on' and the 'right thing to do'. 'Rights' refers to where children's and citizen's rights agendas have produced a political and legal environment that encourages more participative approaches, 'Right on' suggests a hint of ethical and moral superiority that can perhaps create an environment that makes it difficult to critically examine participative approaches in social research. 'The right thing to

do' refers to a question over whether participatory research can claim to be methodologically superior by producing 'better' data or research outputs and research engagements. The main body of this paper consists of a discussion and analysis of the participative nature of a research project with young people. We relate this to the existing literature on participative research with children, and conclude that it is less important to focus on the model and structure of participation than on *how* the participative process impacts on both the experiences of those involved and the types of data, analysis and outputs generated.

### **Participation in research with children and young people**

Debates around the nature and theory of participation tend to predominately examine participation in society/civic practices, rather than social research. Some of these debates will be referred to in this paper, where relevant, but the paper is particularly concerned with participation in research. Participation in research appears to be fairly broadly conceptualised, and four main forms can be distinguished. Firstly, some research appears to be described as participatory simply because children and young people are invited to be participants, but where all other aspects of the research are in the control of the researcher and methods of data generation are in the form of traditional interviews, questionnaires or rating scales (for example, Fernandez). Secondly, 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 Clarke (2001) and Thomas (2002). Thirdly, some research centres train children and young people 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 (for example, Hannan et al. 2002, Smith et al. 2002, Kellet et al. 2004,). Fourthly, some (including the research reported in this paper) involve children and young people 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). There is often overlap in aims and means between the last three groups.

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 (see Freeman, 2007). The right of children to participate in decisions that affect them (Article 12 of the UNCRC) gives political and quasi-legal strength to the promotion of research which enables children's voices to be heard concerning aspects of society or their everyday lives that affect them. In childhood and youth studies, there has been intensive debate about the nature and impact of participatory initiatives. Although these usually relate to children's participation in civic and political society (e.g. consultations, youth councils, development projects) these debates are relevant to, and influential on, participatory research (Jones, 2004) so it is worth considering these in this paper.

Davis (2007) lists the perceived benefits of participative projects as helping children develop self-worth, feelings of empowerment, and a sense of social justice, and also having a protective factor in that where children have a voice they are less likely to be abused. In turn, they challenge power differences and promote mutual respect and positive adult-child relationships. Here can be seen the two main discourses of participation as outlined by Thomas (2007), a discourse of social relations, inclusion and *process*, and a discourse of political relations, power, change, challenges, and *outcome*.

However, despite the perceived benefits of participation in society, there have been criticisms of participation as enacted in many areas of society. Drawing on Arnstein's work on citizen participation (1979), Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992, in Thomas, 2007), has been used as a framework for assessing how genuinely children are enabled to participate in particular projects, with some involvement described as tokenistic, and a more ideal level as being child initiated and child led. Although Thomas (2007) notes that Hart did not expect this ladder to be used in such a way, and that it was developed more as a rhetorical device than as a fixed hierarchy of participation, this critical framing of

some participation being more genuine than others has been influential in the field. Whilst ladders of participation might be crudely typified as measuring 'how much' children are enabled to participate, others have criticised 'who' is enabled to participate. Davis (2007) cites Pupavac (2002) as critiquing participatory processes as privileging the emotionally literate, over those who do not wish to be sucked in by constructions of good citizenship. Vandebroek and De Bie (2006) similarly suggest that participation tends to privilege the already privileged, with many participatory processes reflecting white middle-class norms of communication. These authors, and others, suggest that participatory government or civic engagement places more emphasis on process than outcome. Davis (2007:140) concludes that many 'discursive spaces' are needed between children, young people and adults, and there needs to be rapid responses where possible, plus a recognition that different policies and practices will impact on different children in a variety of ways. Otherwise 'participation becomes a cruel and warped barrier to change.'<sup>1</sup> Davis' critique is not the first, and others have criticized tokenistic participation, especially when carried out by governments and quangos (refs). Indeed, as academics we are perhaps 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 outcomes might be seen to be applied to participatory research. Whilst some have claimed that children's involvement in research produces better, or at least different data, (e.g. Smith et al. 2002), this has not been systematically evidenced.

Gallagher and Gallagher (forthcoming) 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 (see, for example, Grover, 2004). They note that whilst most participatory research with children is labeled 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

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<sup>1</sup> Davies is specifically writing about social inclusion projects here.

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 of or extension from 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 adults and children, 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 Lee (2001) to theorise children and adults as human 'becomings' whose identities are interdependent and relational, attempting to move on from a simplistic and static duality (Prout, 2005) that separates children as powerless and dependent and adults as powerful and independent. Whilst Thomson 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 approach and understandings of research than about specific 'techniques', in other words it is about research methodology, rather than research methods.

In this paper we report on research which, like many others, 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 paper attempts to critically and reflexively analyse this on-going research. We firstly outline the research project itself. We then go on to look at three stages of the research process, giving brief examples from each of



them of how we feel the participative nature of the research impacted on the research process and outcome.

### **The (extra)ordinary lives project**

The (Extra)ordinary lives project is a demonstrator project within the ESRC national centre for research methods' qualitative research node based at (*name*) University. It has 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 meetings). 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. Individual meetings 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 socialising. Therefore, whilst 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. Individual research encounters varied in form. These included: time 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. Research encounters outside of sessions might take place for young people to take researchers on (videoed) walking or driving tours of current or former localities, or in their homes when work commitments meant that they could not come to group sessions. Advice and support for the project was provided by the Tros Gynnal Children's Charity.

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 have continued their involvement into 2008 by taking part in analysis and dissemination as is described in this paper. 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 are girls and young women. They were aged 10-20, all are ethnically white and from the South Wales 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.

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. 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. Themes relating to each young person's everyday life were generated and shared and developed with the young person (see below). Data were then coded according to these themes and cross-'case' analysis was carried out with the use of Atlas ti to further develop the substantive and theoretical themes that emerged from the individual analyses. The size of the sample does not allow for generalisations to be made about the lives of looked after young people. Nonetheless, the richness of the data obtained allows an unusual opportunity to gain a complex understanding of how these (extra)ordinary young peoples' subjectivities are

developed and enacted in their everyday lives, and to further develop an understanding of the ethics and workings of participative, longitudinal research.

Young people who are looked after are often subject to fixed categorisation 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. Theoretically, we locate our research within a Foucauldian conceptualisation of human identity or the 'subject' as always and already socially, culturally and historically constituted (add ref) and the process of subjectification as relational and performative- that is, in a constant state of becoming (Butler). We thus regard some aspects of the discursive categorization and dualisation of (child/adult, being/becoming, individual/social) as conceptually reductionist (Prout, 2005). By exploring everyday practices, relationships, emotions and imaginations (of the past, present and future) (Smart, 2007), we can gain some insights into the performative and contextual contingency of 'identity work'. A further theoretical aspect of this research, and indeed the participation debate, is that of the nature of power. Although we fully recognise that the manner in which children and young people experience the care system often leaves them feeling disempowered and vulnerable, we would resist some of the cruder depictions of power in the participation paradigm that depicts power as a finite 'thing' which can be shared, broken down, given up or removed.

Although we have argued that our ethical *intentions* (in which participation is situated) were an important part of how we formulated the research project, we acknowledge that intentions may not be fulfilled and, as Gallagher (2007), drawing on a Foucauldian perspective, argues, the crucial points for analysis are the enactment and effects of participation. In this vein, most of the paper is devoted to an analysis of how participation was operationalised in our research, some detailed data examples of its enactment during the research and some

conclusions about the effects of the participatory nature on the data produced, the data analysis and dissemination.

### **Engagement and 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. Thomson (2007:210) theorises participatory research spatially, arguing that it can be typified as taking place across closed, invited or open/claimed 'spaces'. Our research fits with her description of open participative research, where participation is organic in nature, where the ways in which data generation is difficult to plan and where there is room for participants to 'claim' the research space. Here, a less directive approach is taken by researchers than in more managed forms of participative research. Our research project was organic in nature, in that the form of data generation adapted and developed according to the interests of the particular participants, and the changing dynamics of the group. Whilst some young people, particularly the oldest two participants (aged 17 and 20), were willing to share intimate and detailed descriptions of their everyday lives and histories from early on in the project, the other participants' engagement was slower and self-regulated. Each young person developed their own relationship to and thus engagement with modes of data generation, but in general young people (the boys and the girls and young women) tended to share more intimate experiences or personal perspectives when alone with a researcher, often on the move (walking together or in the car). Visual data, such as scores of photographs and videos, mainly generated by the young people independently and alone, gave rich insights into their everyday routines, material worlds, relationships and sense of self. 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. The fun and socialising 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 and what? I went actually it's only my mother' and I went 'I wouldn't even go back to my mother anyway' so I went 'what's - your it business and she's got a big pout now as she was saying this *(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 YP 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?

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 overlooked (Bloor et al., 2001). 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.

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 pre-determined plan or direct questioning. The type of data generation that evolved, moving across different spaces, and visual data, affected the 'findings' with insights (for example) into how young people used space, identified with places and the interactions between body image and identity. 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

Despite the advantages outlined so far, of adapting the project to the young people's communication styles, there were times when the informality and willingness to let young people lead the content of meetings meant that little focused 'data' was gathered. By data here we mean talk, actions, production of visual materials, etc. that related somehow to our general research interests. Indeed, the ability of some young people to contribute could be impeded by being talked over by dominant group members. This notion of 'power over' also seemed to operate through the intersectionality of various embodiments such

as, physical size, age, intellectual ability, occupation of space and pitch of voice gender (with girls dominating conversations and space more so than boys here),. In the following extract, recorded in the car on the way to a climbing centre for an end-of-project treat, it can be seen that Angel (aged 10) had no opportunity to develop her narrative about her holiday as she was constantly interrupted by Keely (aged 13).

[inaudible (33.58) – talking over each other]

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 (34.10)] Can you belay, can you belay, can any of you belay –

[inaudible (34.15) – talking over each other]

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 marginalisation, categorisation and positioning as 'looked after' and family and belonging). The voluntary nature of all aspects of the project also meant that young people could attend, yet withhold, or later withdraw permission for any data relating to them to be used in the analysis. (see *Renold et al. 2008* for a detailed discussion of consent issues). 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 validity of the methodology, particularly in terms of participatory methods as ethical enterprise (Renold and Holland 2006). Yet, on listening back to audio 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 collection with this group of young people, for our particular aim of exploring everyday relationship cultures. Nonetheless, we recognise that not only is this a resource intensive method, its unstructured nature could restrict participation for some participants in some group situations. The next section takes a critical look at our attempts to involve the young people in analysis.

### **Analysis:**

It is often claimed that participatory research rarely involves participants beyond the data generation stage and that participants' involvement in analysis is minimal. This perhaps reflects a conceptualisation of analysis as a separate, formal stage of the research process, yet in qualitative research analysis is more often conceived of as beginning with the development of research questions and occurring throughout data generation and beyond (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). With this conceptualisation of analysis as always already embedded in the research process as a whole, it can be seen that many participative projects engage young people to some extent in analytical thinking about data by reflecting back to participants the researcher's own emerging analysis and engaging the participant in discussions about this. Participatory analysis might then be conceived as engaging in informal interactions seeking feedback, clarification and input with child participants (e.g. Thomas and O'Kane, 1998), or as a more formal 'stage' of the research process where participants are more overtly engaged in analysis as a defined research activity, perhaps with training in methods of analysis (Kellet et al. 2004 and Paine et al., 2007). Some researchers, such as Allan (2005)'s ethnographic research of



femininity and achievement in a private single-sex girls school do both disrupting conventional modes of qualitative analysis, such as thematic coding but also distinguishing between analysis as on-going process and analysis as a bounded activity . Allan set-up a discrete analytic activity with the participants choosing to explore analytic themes in more depth through essay writing. 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 formalised sessions from all but the two oldest participants. We therefore experimented with both analysis as process and analysis as discrete activity, both of which would be strongly individualised 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. These 'findings' were shared in various ways with the participants, mapped out visually, written-up or discussed verbally , or a combination of these was used during analysis meetings with individual participants. 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 Whilst 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 (Neveah, age 17, was an exception to this). Instead, our analysis has been deepened by on-going 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.

In terms of transparency, fieldnotes from an 'analysis' meeting with Michael, aged 13, reveal that the researcher was given 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 he had provided us with.

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, saying also that we didn't have any audio recordings that some people did, like of car conversations but we had some details about that through the notes that we made afterwards. 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. I'd described them as being like a diary that you kept to remind yourself of everything that was going on cause that if you didn't you'd forget lots of stuff and he was saying he'd forgotten about making lots of his films so he could see how that could happen. We talked about the themes in relation to Michael, Family, Friends, Interests, Places, and the Project and the various ways he'd shared parts of his everyday life with us and how we'd summarised that, and also the things that he hadn't shared with us or didn't seem interested in talking about or doing. He thought what we'd come up with was good and that it did reflect his everyday life and how he'd wanted to show that to us, and only added in a couple of details about things that had changed (Nicola: researcher, fieldnotes, 30/1/08)

With Neveah, a care leaver, a long conversation with her about how we were beginning to understand the data she had generated, led to her expanding on and clarifying many of the themes, and also stating that it was leading to her thinking about herself differently as well.

Emma (researcher): 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, I normally –

Emma: Have you not?

Nevaeh: No.

*Later in the conversation...*

Nevaeh: Yeah. It makes a lot of sense though, that. Seeing it like that, each little path made a lot of sense you know.

Emma: Yeah.

Nevaeh: But trying to put it all together – it's hard.

Towards the end of this excerpt, Neveah reminds us of the difficulties (and dangers) of trying to come up with a coherent summary or overview of someone else's life. 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, which will not lend itself to neat 'findings' which generalise about young people in care.

Although involving the young people in discussions about how we were making sense of the data they had generated with us fitted well with the ethics and approach to our project overall, there are potential disadvantages to involving participants in analysis, particularly if conceived of as asking participants to confirm analysis as 'true' or not (Bloor, 1978). In order to understand what we are doing when we are asking young people to contribute in analysis, we must investigate the issue of 'voice'. There is a risk that if we *only* accept these young people's perspectives, we can collude in dominant cultural discourses such as 'mother blaming' for child neglect (Scourfield, 2003) or racism. If we instead accept that the participants are contributing to the analysis, rather than dictating it, is there a risk that we are only happy to accept their analyses when we agree with them, as may sometimes occur in social workers' and other professionals' assessments? (Holland, 2004). A further issue is that these children's experiences are only part of the care experience (although of course a central one). Their carers, siblings and birth parents may have different perspectives. Krimmerman (2001) raises the point in relation to researchers who claim 'epistemic privilege' (p.70) of the 'voices' of women who are survivors of domestic abuse, asking if the voices of those committing the violence would also be regarded as authentic, valid voices. He suggests that by taking part in such claim-making we may fall into traps of relativity. However, he suggests that we may wish to make more modest claims about those involved in participatory research (he is in fact discussing participatory action research which often has distinct political or social goals). Krimmerman argues 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. 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 are trained to place qualitative data in a social and theoretical context. We take the stance in this research that children's voices, and their analyses of the meanings of their words and actions, are vital *parts* of a process of social research in which evidence from a wide range of sources and methods may be synthesised to form a more integrated and holistic understanding.

There are further hurdles in engaging participants in analysis when analysis is confined to a stage in the research process. For example, in this project, although some data generation took place in shared spaces, several young people shared personal experiences when alone with a single researcher or communicated these to us in their multi-media outputs. It would therefore be unethical to engage young people in analysing each others' 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 involvement in dissemination, as will be discussed in the next section.

Finally there is 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 in 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 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'.

At times, in our view, the literature on involving children and young people 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 potential disadvantages relating to voice and authenticity. We also noted how, in our project, formal engagement in analysis whilst having advantage of transparent 'participation' fitted less well with young people's styles of involvement than continual analytical talk throughout the project. The next section continues the reflection on participatory processes by discussing the dissemination of the project findings.

## **Dissemination**

Some of the participants were suitably challenging about the potential outcomes of the research, with some participants asking researchers what difference research such as this could make to young people in care. This presented a challenge to researchers to explain in an understandable way how outputs from qualitative research can, and at times cannot, provide necessary evidence for policy and practice. The team were able to talk about previous research 'outputs', and show articles and books arising from this. This provided a base for discussions about anonymity and privacy. With a small number of participants, and with pseudonyms being known to each other, there are ethical difficulties in sharing some of the outputs of the project to all participants, or for example, asking participants to take part in presentations about the research. Firstly, it would not be appropriate for young people to present particular personal accounts from other young people, meaning that only certain topics or data extracts can be presented by participants. Secondly, some outputs of our research (especially methodological discussions) are of little interest to the participants. Nonetheless, we regularly shared parts of papers we had written or presented with the young people, to demonstrate how their data is transformed into academic outputs. Additionally, most were keen to share in dissemination with their immediate carers and with policy makers.

We invited the young people in our study to take part in semi-public dissemination of our findings by organising an event for young people in care (including our participants). Due to ethical issues relating to anonymity, three

short films were commissioned by a local film-maker (who was also a qualitative social scientist) which would recreate some of the young people's narratives and visual imagery using a combination of animation and actors. Participants were consulted about the content of these films and here is a short extract from a lengthy discussion between a young person and a researcher about this:

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 and, yeah.

Nevaeh: It's mad, like seeing it all –

Emma: Innit?

Nevaeh: Like ... that's you.

This event was well attended by local young people in care and care leavers, featured an address by a government minister and involved an actress from a popular fictional television show about children in a children's residential unit. It raised a number of ethical issues relating to participation and dissemination. Firstly, in terms of content, we wished to give our participants a choice over the aspects of their lives that they wished to portray publicly (and anonymously). The majority of this material was indeed 'everyday' in line with project aims. Family, friends and animals were the themes focused upon after discussion with the participants about their material. Images of the young people themselves, their family and their friends were anonymised using specialist visual software. Extracts from young people's own photos and videos were shown in a collage

of images, that was mainly 'up-beat' in style, backed by soundtrack of music (songs that had been played often by the young people during the project). The three professional films that drew on and recreated data portrayed both positive and more negative stories from everyday lives, including stories about first flats (disappointments and dreams), a cartoon about a young person seeing another resident in her former bedroom, and some tales of conflict and violence in school. Some important narratives from the research participants could not be presented at this event due to participants being aware of each others' identities and the potential for unwanted sharing of highly personal material. The film about conflict in school was withdrawn by the young person whose experiences it portrayed, as she was anxious about her foster carer realising it was her and was keen to avoid any negative representations of her interactions with others ("I'm not showing anything bad"). She is happy for 'her' film to be shown to academic audiences when neither she nor anyone she knows is present. Some young people who attended the event, but who had not been research participants, expressed an opinion that the data products portrayed too 'rosy' a picture of the lives of young people in care. The event had indeed censored some of the data due to the wishes of participants and the researchers' own concerns about audience and purpose of the event. Whilst in most contexts the participants would be entirely unidentifiable through the anonymised data, in front of peers and carers they could have been identifiable and it was therefore unethical to present any aspects of their data with which they were uncomfortable.

Our experiences of this dissemination event is that, on a positive note, our young participants were able to make clear choices about how, when and where their experiences could be portrayed. However, it must be recognised that involving research participants fully in dissemination can potentially lead to a less than comprehensive picture of research 'findings', particularly when the research includes personal narratives. If participants are always present at dissemination events, then personal material from other participants may not be able to be included, where participants know each others' identities. Therefore, we would suggest that participative dissemination can risk producing sanitised



findings, although we would acknowledge that this will not be the outcome in all contexts.

## Conclusion

Gallagher and Gallagher (forthcoming) argue that the construction of researcher as powerful and child participants as lacking in power is an unhelpful and simplistic duality that can be disrupted by an understanding of *both* adult and child subjects as always becoming, emergent subjects and an acknowledgement that children are able to find their own ways of participating in research (that will not always suit adult expectations). In this paper we have discussed how the children in our project developed their own ways of participating, how we were not always adult 'experts' attempting to teach children how to research and indeed how at times as adults we felt quite powerless.

Whilst working in groups as well as individually best mimicked the young people's preferred style of communicating, 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 others' identities (and pseudonyms) then they could identify each others' personal data in dissemination events. This lack of anonymity over personal data also meant that analysis of the data as a whole was ethically impossible, and participants could only analyse their own material, which meant that they did not have access to the whole analytical process.

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 outcomes.

To return to our title, we cautiously conclude that this type of participatory research is a 'right thing to do' or at least a helpful thing to do, because it is based on a positive ethical framework, supports the political impetus of children's rights and *can* generate such 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 sanitised 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, 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 concur with Krimmerman (2001) in arguing that the strongest evidence base will come from an overall research strategy that combines evidence from highly participative projects with that produced using other social science approaches.

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