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RESEARCHING GIRLS AND VIOLENCE

Facing the Dilemmas of Fieldwork

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This paper explores key methodological and analytical issues encountered in an exploratory study of teenage girls' views and experiences of violence, carried out in Scotland. Researching the ways in which girls conceptualize, experience and use violence raises a number of dilemmas due in part to the sensitive nature of the research topic, and the age and gender of those taking part. Drawing on feminist debates about objectivity, the role of the researcher, power relationships in the production of knowledge, and representation, this article highlights the difficulties of adapting such principles to the day-to-day practicalities of conducting empirical research on girls and violence. It shows how the research itself has been enhanced by having to engage with and work through this complexity.

'Violence' and violent behaviour have been conceptualized and researched from a variety of philosophical, sociological, psychological and moral perspectives (Domenach 1981). Although these perspectives inform the ways in which violence is portrayed, evaluated and responded to, there is a common recognition of the *gendered* patterning of violence. Extreme forms of violence, in particular, are definitively masculine. It is well established that males account for most violence, most homicides, most violent assaults, as well as most forms of violent victimization (Newburn and Stanko 1994).[1] Hence, violence is recognized as a problem and consequence of masculinity (Braithwaite and Daly 1994).

Violence perpetuated by females, on the other hand, is uncommon.[2] Whilst official statistics give the impression that the numbers of young women convicted of 'violence against the person' in England and Wales has grown over the previous ten years, the figure remains small. Numerically and statistically insignificant, female violence is easily dismissed as inconsequential compared to the problem of male violence. Not only are women involved in violence to a lesser extent, but they rarely participate in extreme forms.[3] When female violence does occur, it is commonly considered 'unfeminine', 'unnatural' and thereby pathological (Heidensohn 1985). The depiction of girls as the 'new lads' is most clearly seen in newspaper accounts of violent incidents involving young women (see, for example, Brinkworth and Burrell 1994; Coggan, 2000; Cohen 1994;

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[1] In Scotland in 1998, convictions for non-sexual crimes of violence accounted for 5 per cent or less of persons with a charge proved for all age and sex groupings, with the highest percentage being for males aged under 21 (n=1,400), (Scottish Executive 1999). According to the 1996 Scottish Crime Survey, men were most likely to be victims of violent crime than women, with three per cent of males and two per cent of females reporting such crimes (MVA 1998).

[2] In 1998, females accounted for just 7.5 per cent of non-sexual crimes of violence in Scotland (Scottish Executive 1999).

[3] The female homicide rate is 10.07 and 9.25 per million population in Scotland and England respectively, compared to the male homicide rate in Scotland (28.84), and England (13.40) (Soothill *et al.* 1999).

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Knowsley 1994; Mitchell, 2000) where such violence is presented as a new and growing problem.

Patterns of female invisibility have also been set by male-centred research investigations, as most empirical research and theoretical explanations of violence have focused on men and boys, and the experiences of women and girls have been largely ignored. Where theories of female delinquency and aggression have been put forward, these have tended to be constructed out of existing theories premised upon male experience.[4] With a few notable exceptions (Campbell 1981, 1984; Chesney-Lind 1993, 1997) there has been little examination of how violence might figure in the everyday consciousness of young women and how it might be mobilized in the ordinary settings of their daily lives. There is scarce information about young women's pathways into violence; the manner in which they are violent; how they use or 'manage' violence; how they deal with potentially violent encounters; and how they desist from using violence. The implications of this relative invisibility are far-reaching. Not only does it present problems for 'seeing' girls' violence, but it also means that we lack an informed theoretical and analytical vocabulary to investigate or conceptualize female violence that is not grounded in male behaviour.

In Britain, work on girls and violence is at an embryonic stage. Very few British research endeavours have directly addressed female violence or the role that violence plays in the lives of girls.[5] In North America, however, academic engagement with these issues is burgeoning (see for example, Baskin and Sommers 1993, 1998; Campbell 1990; Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1992; Chesney-Lind 1997). For the most part, this interest has centred on gang involvement and the experiences of girls who are struggling at the socio-economic and socio-cultural margins and who are mostly black or Hispanic.[6] Whilst this research provides a useful theoretical background against which an understanding of girls and violence can be developed, such work is based in a different socio-economic and cultural setting, and cannot be easily projected on to the British context.

The Background to 'A View from the Girls' Project

In our current work, we are attempting to investigate teenage girls' views and experiences of violence and violent behaviour, placing these within the context of their everyday lives. Following Chesney-Lind and her colleagues (1992, 1997) we believe that in order to comprehend girls' relationships to violence it is necessary to understand the social, material and gendered circumstances of their lives, how they live their lives and make sense of their actions, by drawing on their personal accounts. Unlike Chesney-Lind, our focus is not on marginalized gang members, but on girls drawn from a range of socio-economic and class backgrounds, living in a variety of locations across Scotland. For the most part, these girls are not in the juvenile justice system[7] or part of an identifiable gang. Although some of those we have encountered during the research could be described as

[4] Such as those with a biological base (e.g. Wilson and Herrnstein 1985), those which emphasize gender roles (e.g. Berger 1989; Hagan *et al.* 1985, 1987), and those which embrace the 'masculinization' thesis (e.g. Adler 1975).

[5] That said, there are signs that academic interest in the UK is growing. When we first began research in this area in 1997, we were unaware of any other similar work ongoing in Britain. Since then, however, girls' violence has begun to figure increasingly as a topic for research (e.g. Archer 1998; Hardy and Howitt 1998; Kendall 1999).

[6] With one exception (Artz 1998), white girls tend not to be included in such studies.

[7] The Children's Hearing System in Scotland.

such, ours is not specifically a study of 'violent girls'. It looks at the everyday understandings, conceptualizations and experiences of 'ordinary' girls. In exploring girls' everyday experiences, this research differs from much of the North American research which has taken a quantified view, seeking to understand violence in terms of sociological and psychological variables and factors (Artz 1998: 19). It also marks a departure from mainstream criminological research on violence, where the preoccupation has been with the *criminal* violence of the public not the private (Stanko 1994: 97) and much of women's experience of violence has been rendered invisible.

In approaching the research, we utilized a range of methods including the collection of field-notes, self-report questionnaires, small-group discussions and individual, in-depth 'conversations'. Although we did not conduct participant observation with all of the groups all of the time, our qualitative research encounters were rarely 'one-off' meetings and some contact spanned over two years. The richness, length and intensity of these research encounters allowed us to define the style of research as ethnographic. Sometimes interaction with the young women took the form of quiet chats; sometimes it was more social, involving eating and drinking and smoking and 'having a laugh'. At other times, discussion was more formal and structured around particular issues. We drew on a range of visual stimuli and, on occasion, deployed techniques such as vignettes and imaginary scenarios in order to elicit conversation. Although we guided the discussion from time to time and, to an extent, set some parameters for the conversation, we took an early decision to try to move away from the mode of single direct questions and answers which is often the mode of communication that arises in adult-young person interactions. Instead, we chose to conduct open conversations with girls in order to generate data which, we hoped, would move beyond that which we would be able to accumulate through other means. Our intention was to be responsive to the concerns of the girls, letting them talk their own way into, and about, what *they* considered important.

Approximately 800 girls, aged 13–16 years, participated in one or more aspects of our study, a small number of whom had been formally labelled as 'troublesome' or 'violent' or 'at risk' by the education or juvenile justice system. We had a number of reasons for focusing on this particular age range. It has been argued that it represents a crucial time for the development of feminine identity (Hey 1997; Lees 1986). It is also a time when girls are nearing transition to the adult world and when they are facing important decisions about their futures, and when their social worlds, life chances and experiences are characterized by 'risks' associated with that transition (Cartmel and Furlong 1997). Perhaps most significantly, it is a time when girls learn how to take up their place in hierarchies and regimes of structural power (Hey 1997) and occupy gendered subject positions. The experience of 'being a girl' is intrinsically bound up with gender, class, race, age and sexuality. These categories operate as organizing principles in girls' everyday lives, imposing limits and boundaries on acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and structuring opportunities. Additionally, and importantly, girls of this age have gone through the process of acquiring knowledge about what society will or will not tolerate in terms of unacceptable behaviour and what happens (or does not happen) when certain rules are broken or norms infracted.

There were other more conventionally criminological reasons for focusing on this age group. For both boys and girls this period is identified as an important time for the onset of offending behaviour, drug use, truancy and running away from home (Graham and

Bowling 1995). Whilst Home Office figures show an increase in 14–17 year olds convicted of 'violence against the person', this is in contrast to a considerable decrease in the number of females aged 18–20 years involved in such offences.[8] There is also an increasing awareness that the young are at a relatively high risk of violence, particularly from those known to them. Crime surveys show that young people (aged 16–24) of both sexes experience disproportionately more violence than older people, and that females experience very different types of violence to males, with 30 per cent of incidents of violence against women (in all age groups) classed as domestic violence, compared to only 3 per cent of incidents against men.[9] Young women are also more fearful of violence (particularly sexual violence). In the 1996 Scottish Crime Survey approximately half of the respondents in the Young Person's sample said that they were 'very' or 'fairly' worried for each type of crime, with females being more likely to be worried about being a victim of any of the types of crime listed.[10]

Feminist Method and Girls' Experience

We characterize this work as 'feminist' on the basis of our epistemological positioning and the methodological decisions made in advance of commencing the study. We assume, as Ramazanoglu has put it (1989), that a key imperative of feminist research is to produce knowledge that provides 'understanding of [women's] experience as they understand it, interpretation of their experience in the light of feminist conceptions of gendered relationships, and a critical understanding of the research process' (1989: 435). Hence our theoretical framework was complemented by reflection on appropriate methods for researching girls and violence and concern for the ethics of our research practice.

Although there is a lack of consensus amongst feminist researchers about what exactly constitutes 'feminist methodology' (Gelsthorpe 1992), there is a common insistence that gender and power, and particularly the interplay of the two, are central to the research endeavour (Harding 1987). Moreover, feminists have turned attention to the fluctuating and fluid nature of power, and the need to attend to gender and power relations between researchers and the researched within the research process.[11] This attention has played out in a refusal to treat women as objects of research, and led to attempts to engage them as active subjects in all stages of the research process (Stanley and Wise 1990). Additionally (and relatedly), there is an emphasis on the significance of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Feminist concerns with reflexivity stress the situating of

[8] According to the Home Office, due to the disproportionate increase in offending amongst younger (under 18), female offenders, the peak age of offending dropped from 18 in 1997 to 15 in 1998 ((1999) Cautions, Court Proceedings and Sentencing, E&W, 1998).

[9] Domestic violence is defined as those incidents involving partners, ex-partners, household members and other relatives (MVA 1998).

[10] Two out of three female respondents said that they were worried about being sexually assaulted, attacked in the street, mugged and robbed (MVA 1998).

[11] Whilst other critical methodological perspectives (e.g. Marxists, Critical Theorists), have offered similar criticisms of social science research (about the need for dialogue with research participants, ethical considerations, and reflexivity within the research process, for example), feminist perspectives remain distinctive in their insistence upon the centrality of gender *and* power. Other perspectives often ignore or marginalize gender; sometimes perpetuating gendered power relations within the research process.

the researcher and understanding her 'personal history' (or 'herstory'), her lived experience (including the relation of research to experience), as integral to the research process (Maynard 1994). Reflexivity also entails a consideration of the *effects* of the experience of fieldwork on the researcher.

These considerations have been particularly important in the context of our study, translating into a number of imperatives that structured our approach. These were: a commitment to ground the study in young women's experiences of violence, hearing their accounts and privileging their subjective views; framing the research as a collaborative exercise in an attempt to reject hierarchical relationships within the research process; and attempting to make explicit the reasoning procedures that we use in carrying out our research (Morris *et al.* 1998) in the recognition that we as researchers are a central part of the research process. A central objective was to try to produce a reflexive, feminist account of knowledge production, whereby we made visible the specific social and political context shaping our research engagement with epistemological, methodological and ethical issues, and also with the interpretation of the 'data' that we generate.

The imperatives structuring the research, coupled with the volatile and sensitive nature of the research topic (violence) and the age and gender of those taking part (teenage girls), together threw up methodological, analytical and ethical dilemmas and practical challenges that form the basis of discussion in the rest of this paper.

Framing the Research as a Collaborative Exercise

Research with young people raises particular ethical issues (see Alderson 1995) in addition to the demands of 'good research practice'. From preliminary work in this area, we were aware of the complexity and the sensitivity of the research topic and of the imbalance of power between the girls and ourselves.[12] Asking research participants about their views and experiences of violence necessarily entails the disclosure of potentially sensitive material. This has implications not only relating to the exploitation of participants' vulnerabilities for the sake of career advancement (Finch 1984: 80; Skeggs 1994: 81), but also in terms of the personal, emotional, psychological and social effects of disclosing painful or personal incidents. As researchers, we had the power to define the research situation, to steer the agenda along a certain course, to control the information we ourselves were prepared to disclose, and also to shape the production of the data (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994).

Attempting to maintain non-hierarchical power relations and foster collaboration proved difficult on a number of levels. Social and legal rules position young people as minors with few decision-making powers, and so accessing girls under the age of 16 involved gaining consent from adult gatekeepers, such as parents and teachers. Gaining consent from girls themselves does not ensure certainty either, because of their marginalized social, political and economic position. As James *et al.* (1998) recognize, such vulnerabilities may put young people 'at risk' in the research relationship through their placing of 'too much' trust in the adult researcher (1998: 187).

[12] Burman *et al.* (1997), *Report to the Calouste Gulbenkian Fundation* (unpublished).

In participating in the research, most girls were entering unfamiliar territory, unsure of what was required of them, of what was entailed in 'research' and of each of our respective roles. Very few had encountered researchers before and, perhaps more significantly, rarely encountered adults who were interested in what they had to say. Consequently, initial contact was very important in setting the tone of the research encounter.[13] Obtaining informed consent required that we tell potential participants what involvement entailed; yet, this was in itself problematic. An important aim of the research was to unpick girls' own meanings and definitions, for example of what they considered 'counted' as violence, and where violence 'fitted' into their lives. Hence, while we needed to explain the research and why it was being done, this had to be achieved without pre-defining the 'problem' or leading girls to give the responses they thought we were anticipating.[14]

From the outset, we stressed our general concern with girls' lives, but also our particular interest in their views and experiences of violence. A significant (but unsurprising) consequence of our decision to 'come clean' about the research topic was that, practically, it became very difficult to overcome the assumption that we were solely interested in the 'problem of violence'. So pervasive and powerful are the associations of violence that it quickly became prioritized as the template for discussion. Girls very rapidly moved on to talking about violence, often offering deeply personal accounts of victimization or involvement in violence, without much preamble. We were surprised at the frequency with which many girls articulated a clear 'need' to talk about the many forms of behaviour they experienced as violence or abuse, its impact on their lives, and their feelings about being subjected to or using violence. In retrospect, we underestimated the centrality of violence and abuse (verbal, physical, emotional and sexual), and the fear of violence, to young peoples' lives.[15]

One means advanced by researchers to redress the balance of power between themselves and their research participants is through reciprocity (Golde 1970/1986). As Hammersley and Atkinson have noted, 'It is hard to expect 'honesty' and 'frankness' while never being frank and honest about oneself' (1995: 91). Throughout the course of the research, girls were curious about our personal biographies and asked specific questions about our personal lives ('Are you two best friends?' or 'Do you have children?') and our past violent experiences ('Were you ever bullied?' or 'Have you ever been in a fight?'). Whilst such exchanges can facilitate the generation of much useful and important 'data', they must be handled sensitively as investment of personal identity in the research relationship can be risky and exploitative. Generally, we did our best to respond to personal questions at the end of the interview, but this was not always possible (for example, where respondents left suddenly). A particular problem we faced was in deciding how much self-disclosure was appropriate or fruitful. Commitment to

[13] This involved an initial visit by two researchers to introduce the project and distribute consent information. The aim was to encourage involvement in the project, whilst providing girls with the chance to go away and think about whether or not they wished to take part.

[14] Brannen (1988), highlights the problems of whether and how to name the topic under investigation; whether or not to reveal all at the outset, and whether or not to set the boundaries of the research (1988: 553).

[15] More than half of the girls in the quantitative sample said they were worried about being sexually attacked (58 per cent), or bullied (50 per cent). The overwhelming majority (91 per cent), had suffered verbal abuse, whilst 41 per cent had experienced someone deliberately hitting, kicking or punching them. A massive 98.5 per cent had witnessed at first hand some form of interpersonal physical violence, and 70 per cent had witnessed five or more different violent acts.

reflexivity suggests that the researcher disclose what are often intensely personal experiences and private emotions. In practice, however, the sensitivity of the research topic, combined with our own feelings of vulnerability, meant that we sometimes felt reluctant about exposing aspects of our own intimate relations.[16]

Group discussions have been proposed as effective in defusing the balance of power between researcher and researched (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999). Such groups dilute the effect of adult-young person power relationships and afford the opportunity of generating data in a situation more closely resembling that of other contexts involving interaction with a peer group. But there are issues of power *within* young people's peer groups to consider (Green and Hart 1999), particularly where participants disclose private intimacies in front of peers with whom they 'have a life' beyond the research. For some girls the group setting provided valuable peer support, in that it allowed them to express their views in an atmosphere of trust and minimal embarrassment. As Kelly (1988) has noted, the process of discussing violence can sometimes lead to a reflexive review of the respondent's experience; disclosure can be a means through which participants' experiences are validated (Currie and MacLean 1997: 167). Many girls maintained that taking part in the research enabled them to reflect upon their experiences and gain better understanding of the role and impact of violence in their lives.

For other girls the group format proved inhibiting. Some were clearly distressed at the turn taken by discussions and we, as researchers, needed to be not only attuned to the possibility of such situations arising, but also equipped to make quick decisions when they occurred. What do you do, for example, if a participant looks like she is about to cry? Or if someone discloses information that is distressing, not only for themselves, but for the other girls present? Should you fill 'uncomfortable silences', or should you sit back and let the participants speak? Questions such as these raise further queries about the appropriate researcher response, for example whether it is better to refocus the discussion on to safer ground (and risk invalidating an individual's experience) or halt the proceedings altogether (thereby drawing attention to the individual girl). In some cases, leaving girls themselves to fill 'uncomfortable silences' can be very revealing—in terms of who says what—but in others it is not appropriate. And one can always explore individual girls' disclosures further in a different (individual interview) setting.

Whereas some researchers argue, on pragmatic grounds, for ethical guidelines to be used on a more or less discretionary basis (e.g. Punch 1986); others point to the way in which ethnography poses a contradiction between feminist ethics and methods (e.g. Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994). A key issue is the inherent tension set up between the aims of research (to 'elicit information') and ethical concerns (to 'protect' those taking part). Having given informed consent, participants should (in theory, anyway) be aware of the potential harm and consequences of disclosure, though it is still the responsibility of the researcher to renegotiate this consent *throughout* the research encounter and in doing so to minimize harm. Our agreed strategy was to allow girls themselves to define how far distressing experiences should be talked about (be this through verbal or non-verbal means). That said, there were instances when *we* felt the need to steer the

[16] Other researchers have written about their ambivalence about wanting to preserve their privacy while asking others to make public parts of their private experience (Mauthner 1998; Bell 1998).

conversation away from sensitive issues, particularly in the group discussions conducted in drop-in centres and youth cafes, where there was a lack of privacy and lots of comings and goings by others not part of the group.[17]

While issues of power and control were clearly crucial, it would be inaccurate to depict girls as completely powerless in the research setting. There were many ways in which girls challenged and contested our power as researchers, for example, by not turning up to pre-arranged meetings, walking out in the middle of interviews, disrupting discussions via interpersonal violence and resisting attempts to restore order. Girls often arrived with pre-arranged appointments (e.g. to meet friends, to go to the cinema, to go shopping), and in doing so set us clearly defined time limits for discussion. A few brought along friends and boyfriends who would sit in on the discussion but refused to take part. Throughout the research, girls challenged our preconceptions about violence and abuse (emphasizing, for example, the serious consequences of verbal abuse and/or disputes among friends, or the 'naturalness' and 'fun' of sibling aggression or physical games), making us reconsider our ideas and reassess our theoretical (and political) positions.

Provoking Violence?

In the research setting, girls' accounts and definitions of violence were the result of their interaction with us as researchers. Girls were oriented towards thinking and talking about violence in advance of each encounter and they told their stories—and acted out their behaviour—as a direct result of our interest and intervention. As 'skilled' researchers, we structured and controlled each encounter; sometimes (it seemed) bordering on the coercive in our pursuit of information. We implicitly challenged girls' views by asking further questions, for expansion of particular points, and requesting examples, using language ('And then what happened?') as well as our bodies (posturing, leaning forward) to show active interest. Viewed this way, there is little difference between encouraging violent talk and the generating of 'data'; the research encounter itself has the potential to resemble and reproduce violence.[18]

By saying to girls that we are taking their accounts and views of violence seriously, we run the risk of contributing violence by and between girls, within and out with the research setting. There were several incidents where talk of violence spilled out into the acting out of physical violence. In some cases, girls spontaneously began to demonstrate certain tactics and manoeuvres. Whilst for the most part these demonstrations were accompanied by much laughter, on a couple of occasions they spilled over into 'serious' fights, and reminded us of the need for ground rules. One particular incident—a fist fight between two 14 year olds, where one girl was pushed into a glass door and hurt quite badly—arose from our use of vignettes and role-playing activities. We abandoned the use of such material thereafter.

[17] Some discussions were held in girls' regular meeting places, usually informal settings where complete privacy was often impossible, with people playing pool or listening to music. In youth centres, we were often unable to secure a private room and discussions took place in an office or kitchen. This is a common problem in research. Maintaining confidentiality in such settings is a tricky issue.

[18] Of course, this observation must be balanced with the fact that the purpose of our research was to generate 'data' on girls' views and experiences of violence and violent behaviour. In other words, producing 'talk' about violence was part of the job.

Violence research has the ability to revive old antagonisms and stir up latent harms not only in the fieldwork setting, but also beyond (Renzetti and Lee 1993; Kelly 1988). One notable example took place in a residential home where, shortly after completing the self-report questionnaire, one girl had what staff there termed a 'violent outburst'. We heard her being dragged, literally kicking and screaming, by care staff back to her room. Such incidents raise ethical concerns about conducting research in such settings and underline the unpredictability of each research encounter. We have little idea, in advance, of the fragility of girls' friendships, their family backgrounds, personal histories, and the legacies of violence in their own lives. This information can sometimes be gleaned from youth workers or other key informants, but is of little use when new girls, with unknown alliances and festering conflicts, turn up to participate in the study.

Interpreting Data—Making Sense of Experience

In conducting this research, we were aware of the importance of remaining reflexive, recognizing that our own (personal and theoretical) assumptions and beliefs needed to be carefully dissected and explicated in terms of their effects on the research process. Research of this nature inevitably involves issues of the personal, the emotional, and the self. As Coffey articulates, 'The memory that is brought to bear is both uniquely biographical and collective. The personal experience of autobiographical memory is organised through socially shared resources' (1999: 127). Researchers approach research both as academics and as individuals with personal lived experiences. As women who were once girls we shifted between being researcher/observer/listener to participant, as aspects of girls' experiences resonated with our own.

Several writers are alert to the effects on researchers of doing sensitive research (see, for example, Kelly 1988; Brannen 1988; Moran-Ellis 1996). Reactions may, in part, be due to the emotional intensity of the stories narrated, but sometimes fieldwork stirs up emotional issues of one's own. The present study has thrown up a myriad of painful disclosures, including: domestic violence, self-harm, being bullied, attempted suicide, rape, torture, as well as mental, physical and sexual abuse. Many of the research conversations were emotionally draining and demanding and, even now, at the writing up stage, it is hard to get away from the impact of some of the stories presented. Relistening to the tapes and rereading transcripts bring the research encounter back to life, often in vivid detail, and can exacerbate the emotions originally experienced (Bourne 1998: 99). Working as a four-person team meant that we were lucky insofar as we were able to discuss emotionally disturbing material in a mutually supportive environment.[19] Each of us was privy to fieldwork experiences that were distressing and as a result we had a shared understanding of the emotions engendered.

Acknowledging the sheer intensity of the emotions involved in the study of violence is vital for researchers as it enables us to analyse reflexively the differences between the values of the self and those of the other (Stanko 1997). According to Stanley and Wise (1990), a duty of feminist research is to deal with women's subjectivity, and that includes the (often conflicting and contradictory) inter-subjectivities of researchers and

[19] This is a luxury often denied to PhD and other lone researchers working on the topic of violence.

participants. What we see often mirrors our own experience as girls as the girls encounter many of the things that we remember doing or experiencing. A danger is, of course, that we begin to attribute *our* own views and motivations to *their* experiences. In this context, issues of power and control are again crucial in shaping the production of data for interpretation. We need to ask ourselves: To what extent do we reconstruct girls' experiences according to a narrative that is comfortable to us as individuals? What silences do we reproduce?

A recurrent example of where we had to balance our own interpretation of events with those of our participants was in relation to girls' definitions of what 'counted' as violence. In our presence, girls often took part in what they described as 'play fighting' or 'royal rumbles'. This took the form of dead-arm punches, arm wrenching, hair tugs, sitting on and slapping one another—all of which were accompanied by much laughter. Girls explained this as 'not violent', as 'okay', or as 'just having a laugh'. However, we observed so-called 'playful' behaviour where equality amongst girls did not seem (to us) to be the case—as 'play' fighting escalated into kicking and punching, and certain girls seemed targeted as victims. Hence while we try to avoid making judgments according to our criteria (personal or academic) on the intensity of the 'violent' experiences related to us, the only basis we have for this is what girls say and even this can be disputed. Although we have tried not to be tied to preconceived frameworks, we necessarily come away from each research encounter with a view. There is no such thing as a 'neutral' account of violence. Physical violence is something about which we have strong normative views, and these can encroach on our interpretations.

As Morris *et al.* have acknowledged, 'The closer our subject area is to our own lives and experiences, the more we can expect our own beliefs to shape . . . the interpretations we generate' (1998: 222). An example of this occurred during the first phase of the research, when one of the researchers was conducting fieldwork at her previous secondary school. She became aware that a group of girls completing the questionnaire was taunting another pupil. Despite appearing visibly distressed, this girl assured the researcher that she was 'okay' and 'not bothered' who responded by asking the 'bullies' to stop making hurtful remarks—they said they were only 'having a laugh'—and telling the 'victim' that she could sit somewhere else. On writing up her field-notes, the researcher reflected that the fact of having had (what appeared to be) a very similar experience—being bullied by girls at the same school—had had a direct impact upon how she interpreted the incident. In other words, she drew on her own experiences as a girl to explain participants' behaviour (as bullying, hurtful), rather than listening to the their own views and understandings (as only a bit of fun, not upsetting).

Inter-subjectivities exist not only between the researcher and the researched, but also between different members of the research team. As individuals within a research team we each have different biographies (in terms of age, class, cultural background and research training and experience) and so experience the research process differently. In addition to impacting upon what we 'see' as individuals, our individual biographies and self-presentation make a difference to how we are perceived by 'gatekeepers' and those taking part in the study. Girls responded to each of us quite differently and so, on subsequent occasions, with the same groups of girls, each of us came away with a different impression. Whilst attention has been paid to the emotionality, experience and subjectivity of individual researchers, discussion of these issues where there are more than one researcher involved is relatively scarce (see Kelly *et al.* 1994). As the nature of data

generated is contingent upon the individual carrying out the research, then individual researchers may provide disparate perspectives and understandings of the research process and the research data, depending upon their varying knowledges, experiences and backgrounds.

An example of this lack of 'fit', between what we conceptualize or prioritize as individual researchers, relates to our recollection of group discussions with young women. All of our group discussions were co-moderated. At the end of each session, the two researchers completed a proforma that recorded details about the group dynamics and key issues discussed (for example, age differences and growing out of violence, threatening spaces, appearance as a key feature of inclusion/exclusion). On occasions, there were differences between what different members of the research team noted as important. Sometimes there were also differences in what they *both* recalled and what was actually recorded on tape. This was more than just an inaccuracy caused through mishearing or recall difficulties—in some cases it was a fundamental misinterpretation of what girls had said. Whilst such inconsistencies can be partially accounted for by the different modes of recording data—one where verbal data is privileged (transcript of tape) and the other where visual and non-verbal forms are evident (where researcher is watching closely for girls' reactions, body-language, posturing etc. as they speak)—the crucial question remains. That is, how do we deal with competing accounts between different members of the research team, whilst simultaneously taking account of girls' experiences and subjectivity? One way of addressing this issue was to ensure that all qualitative data were coded by two researchers. This can be very time-consuming, although it did go some way towards dealing with inconsistencies. Wherever possible, we try to explain the grounds on which particular interpretations have been made, by making explicit the process of decision making that produces the interpretation and the logic of the method on which these decisions are made. In common with other feminist research endeavours (see Maynard and Purvis 1994) we acknowledge the complexity and potential contradiction, and recognize the possibility of silences and absences in the data. Yet our experience would suggest that differences could also be seen as a research strength, as they can foster a higher level of conceptual thinking than individuals working alone. This can be particularly enriching for the process of analysis (Barry *et al.* 1999).

Whereas collaborative research shares similar limitations of lone research, it also presents 'special opportunities for expanding and improving the ways in which [researchers] present their work' (May and Pattillo-McCoy 2000). Most notably, it can provide a richer description than individual endeavour alone, by highlighting perceptual inconsistencies and thereby recognizing the influence of researchers' personal and intellectual background(s) on the collection and recording of data. Of course, the difficulty is that most academic texts require at least some suggestion that the author is offering the 'truth' about the field he or she has studied. We need to be able to present a coherent report to our funding body, and avoid the danger of retreating into epistemological and moral relativism. Research accounts that refuse to downplay the perceptual inconsistencies of two or more researchers highlight that there is no one truth or reality. After all, as Miri Song (1998) has acknowledged, the presentation of a polished, linear account does not in itself enhance the validity of the information contained therein. Reflexive accounts that indicate awareness that they are ultimately subjective are surely more credible than those feigning objectivity.

Disclosure and Representation

A key dimension of our work is to chart commonalties in the ways in which violence is experienced and utilized by young women, against the recognition that their views and experiences are not homogenous and vary according to age, ethnicity, class and personal experiences. In grounding our study in the lives of our research participants, we follow the general feminist axiom that recognizes 'experience' as an essential category of everyday knowledge that structures life in important ways. It has been well argued that experience is a starting point for feminist knowledge (see, for example, Harding 1987; Stanley and Wise 1990) but that experiences remain insufficient in themselves (Ramazanoglu 1989). There are two problematic issues here: the range of girls' experiences and how we interpret them.

Accounts will vary according to where respondents are socially positioned, their memory, and the context of the telling, as well as their wish to talk. Many of the girls in our study had not previously had the opportunity to talk about violence or associated issues, or to think about violence in relation to themselves in the way in which it was raised in the research encounter (thinking about fights between siblings, for example). Similarly, not all girls had the same ability to verbalize their experiences; whilst some were able to give detailed accounts of violence in their lives, to speak in a clear and articulate way, and to express their ideas coherently, others were not. Some girls talk a 'violent talk'; they speak about their own violence—sometimes quite explicitly and graphically; and they also relay their experiences of violence—sexual, physical and emotional. This ability to 'speak violence' also varies across different groups of girls and much has to do with the setting and context in which the research takes place. In some settings, such as residential schools and secure units where the experience of violence is often part of the reason a girl is being 'looked after', girls can be very forthcoming. Girls in such circumstances often operate an informal sharing of experiences between themselves, in addition to more formal interactions with staff that address violence explicitly. On many occasions, girls spoke to us—and each other—about being 'battered', raped, physically and sexually abused by family members and acquaintances and about being violent themselves in words that were forthright, highly descriptive, and sometimes shocking. Other girls talked much more tentatively about violence; some used rhetorical devices in the 'telling' and others did not speak at all. In common with research on women's experiences of violence (Kelly 1988), we found that many girls did not identify or name their experiences as 'violent', and often minimized the harm done to, or by, them.

The second issue relates to the interpretation of girls' experience. There is no such thing as an authentic experience unmediated by interpretation. Stories, narratives, accounts do not remain unchanged, but are edited, rewritten, and interpreted away from the social relationships in which they occurred. Reaching conclusions in research is a social process and interpretation of data is always a 'political, contested and unstable activity' (Maynard and Purvis 1994: 7). 'Working up' of data into a sociological research account inevitably places greater emphasis upon different ways of knowing about social life.

In any research there is always a danger that the voices of particular groups or participants become selected out, misinterpreted or misunderstood and problems of interpretation and representation were particularly pertinent here. In particular, we had

problems in trying to find the terminology to reflect adequately the range of views and experiences about which girls told us, and in interpreting the similarities in accounts as well as the differences. An informing premise of the research was to 'give voice' to the cross-section of girls and young women who took part, in order to allow a public representation of their personal and social lives and understandings and conceptualizations of violence. For marginalized (and private) voices to be heard and communicated as public knowledge there must be an engagement with the issue of interpretation. As highlighted above, young peoples' voices are particularly susceptible to being marginalized and girls, in particular, are a socially silenced group. Their voices are rarely heard and they wield little power in the public sphere. Whilst we do not wish to mute the voices of our research respondents, there is a delicate balance to be struck between 'giving them voice' and opening them up to the possibilities of misappropriation and subjugation.

In particular, we continue to grapple with what Renzetti and Lee (1993) call the 'politics of disclosure'. Out of all of the data that we have accumulated exactly what, and how much, should be disclosed, to whom, and how should this be done? What do we include and what do we leave out? Do we apply a degree of self-censorship to some aspects of the data and, if so, which? Should we intentionally omit some material and, if so, how can we justify including other material?[20] As researchers researching private lives, yet working within an academic discourse, we are essentially straddling two social worlds. During the fieldwork and analysis, we are immersed in the less visible, private, personal lived experiences of girls. In disseminating these experiences to academic and wider audiences we enter the public sphere. Ribbens (1998) describes this as being at the 'edges' of different social worlds. Being 'at the edges' results in an inherent tension between privileging girls' accounts, on the one hand, and representing these within an academic framework, on the other. We want to remain true to the forms of knowledge that we gain in such private, personal settings but as researchers we also need to serve an academic audience, and beyond.

From the outset of the study, we have been mindful of the need to try to think through the potential results of our work, as well as possible areas of controversy or contention, as a way of anticipating potential distortions and misinterpretations. Consequently, some early decisions were made with both our intended and potential audiences in mind. Inevitably this brought with it more dilemmas, and forced us to consider, at an early stage, who the research was 'for' (see Edwards and Ribbens 1998). Considering the competing needs of multiple audiences and the methods of dissemination required to meet these needs is a fruitful (if potentially daunting) way to focus the mind. Reminding ourselves about why we embarked on the study has been a useful strategy throughout the process of doing it. A main reason is that we decided that there is value in making the experiences of girls available to public audiences. This in itself raises many difficulties, some of which we cannot resolve, but only manage in a principled and reflexive way.

[20] In many ways, this mirrors our preoccupations with what and how much of ourselves we include/reveal throughout the research process.

Conclusion

As the discussion above will hopefully illustrate, whilst we anticipated a number of practical dilemmas and challenges we would likely be confronted with, we certainly did not anticipate the centrality and importance of such challenges (and the means to overcome them) to the overall progress of the research and the insight gained. Having to engage with the theoretical and practical problems that arise and work through the layers of complexity involved has undoubtedly enhanced our research. Notably, thinking reflexively about the research process has forced us to re-examine the role of the researcher(s) and how that has impacted upon the data collection process and the data generated. It reminds us that there is neither one truth nor one objective reality in social scientific enquiry. As a result we need to be able to make explicit both the nature of the dilemmas and challenges that we face, as well as the losses and the gains that result from each of our decisions.

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