

‘I wouldn’t have let you in if you’d had a folder.’ Access and resistance in a qualitative interview study.

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to discuss methodological issues connected to being a member of a stigmatised group invited to take part in a research study.

Design

This paper draws on experiences of interviewing young parents and their families about teenage parenthood. The paper reflects on how the feelings of young parents about being under surveillance all the time, by official agencies and in their communities, could lead to resistance to ‘official’ visitors, role confusion relating to access, and a great deal of image management, all of which potentially influenced the interviews.

Findings

Participants may feel that they should consent to an interview because of their position as a member of a group accustomed to being under surveillance, but they can take the opportunity to use the interview to demonstrate their competence, in this case as mothers. Interviewing members of a stigmatised group such as teenage parents empowers them to challenge negative stereotypes normally encountered in discourses of teenage parenting, thus subverting a sense of feeling bound to take part in an interview and turning the encounter around to assert a positive identity.

Originality

The ‘positionality’ of the researcher as an influence on the research process has been widely examined, the positionality of the participants less so. This paper highlights how the ways in which members of a stigmatised and potentially vulnerable group position themselves, and can use the interview as part of the process of asserting a valued identity.

Key words: Reflexivity; qualitative; consent; interviews; researcher/participant interactions

Introduction

At the end of the first interview for my study about teenage parenting, I was packing my notes and recorder away when my interviewee, Naomi, said she liked my bag. I was carrying a small flowery-patterned satchel, bought from a well-known UK high street retailer. ‘I’m glad you came with a bag like that,’ she said, ‘not wearing badges and carrying folders and stuff. I wouldn’t have let you in if you’d had a folder.’ Naomi had talked at length in her interview about how she felt she was perceived, particularly about feeling judged by those around her, who she was sure looked down on her for being a teenage mother. She did not want her neighbours seeing anyone who looked ‘official’ coming to her house, as she felt that would confirm, in their eyes, that she was a bad mother who was being monitored by Social Services.

These themes of continuous assumed surveillance and the judgement and stigma associated with that came through strongly from the interviews and focus groups I conducted for this study, and I touch upon the themes in the discussion which follows. However, the main purpose of this paper is to examine methodological issues that appear to be connected to being a member of a stigmatised group being invited to take part in a research study, rather

than examining stigma and judgement themselves. The paper begins with a short discussion of reflexivity in qualitative research, then considers issues of access to research participants, and resistance and image management by those participants. I conclude by arguing that the interview process can be used by participants to position themselves in such a way as to challenge negative stereotypes attached to their stigmatised role of 'teen parent'.

Qualitative research and the need for reflexivity

'We no longer question the need for reflexivity: the question is how to do it.' (Lumsden, 2012:3)

Reflexivity in the research process has become an increasingly important area of concern for qualitative researchers. We are familiar with the need to consider how our data may have been influenced by contextual details, and how personal characteristics such as gender, age, race and class may influence the interactions between ourselves as researchers and our participants (Broom et al 2009). The idea that the research process is a one-way flow of information from respondent to the researcher has long been abandoned, not least because as Oakley says, 'the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of the interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship' (1981:41).

As Coffey suggests, 'the accomplishment of fieldwork is not a passive activity. We actively engage in identity construction and recasting' (1999: 26). The concept of researcher-as-instrument (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), where the researcher is seen as an active element of the research process, is useful here in the way it allows us to consider how the

researcher engages actively in fieldwork processes. In my study, I was interviewing teenage parents, a potentially vulnerable group who have been vilified in the media and by politicians for their supposed failings and weaknesses, so I thought quite carefully about how I might be perceived. Oakley (1981) points out that it is neither possible nor desirable in qualitative research to try to be neutral, and there is an extent to which, as a researcher, one wants to be liked – a researcher needs participants to want to talk to them, and not be hostile. Bott (2010) writes vividly about the challenges she faced interviewing timeshare salesmen in Tenerife who made it clear by their sexist and racist talk and behaviour that they did not like or respect her. Although I did not expect to face such extreme views, I was conscious that my position as a researcher from the university was not neutral, and that I might be viewed by the teenagers with some suspicion. Arai (2003) notes that Teenage Pregnancy Coordinators may have been perceived as the enemy by teenage parents because one key aspect of their role was to reduce pregnancies. As the recruitment strategy for my study involved the local Teenage Pregnancy Support Unit (TPSU), there was a likelihood that I might be perceived as being part of that organisation, which could have an impact on some of the topics for discussion, particularly those concerning the support available to young parents. My approach was to introduce myself as being ‘from the university’ and not from TPSU, although this then brings its own challenges, particularly around social class. One way I attempted to deflect this in the focus groups with young people, which took place during December, was to take tins of biscuits from the Christmas range of a well-known UK high street retailer, and make jokes about ‘posh biscuits in a tin’. I also talked about my own family in order to establish some common ground as a parent, and possibly establish legitimacy by having a ‘maternal identity’ (Frost and Holt 2014). There is some disagreement about feminist approaches to qualitative research which argue that empathy and reciprocity are a necessary part of the interview process (Pezalla et al 2012), whereas others suggest

instead that attempts at empathy are dangerous and superficial (Tanggaard, 2007) and self-disclosure does not necessarily build rapport (Abell et al 2006). Despite trying to build empathy, there is an extent to which being ‘the girl from the University’ (Richards and Emslie, 2000) introduces a hierarchy of power if the participants had not been or were unlikely to go to university. It is not possible to have a non-hierarchical relationship between researcher and participants if, as was the case in this study, some of the participants perceived me as having power, expertise and influence. As Brewer (2000) suggests, it is essential that the researcher is visible in the text in ethnographic research, particularly when conducting research which may have political implications, which is the case for research about teenage parents. We cannot get away from who we are; to pretend to be something we are not, in order to gain access for research purposes, would be unethical, and by thinking reflexively about ‘who we are’ and how that might influence the research, we make the processes visible.

The study

The study was about multigenerational experiences of teenage parenting. The intention was to interview teenage mothers and mothers-to-be who had themselves been the child of a teenage mother, who would also be invited to take part in the study. The partners of the young mothers were also invited to participate where possible, as were the older generation of fathers. All my initial contacts were made via the TPSU in the city where I was working; in late 2011 and early 2012, young women attending the service for the first time were asked if they knew how old their mother was when she had her first baby. If they said she had been in her teens, they were asked if they would like to participate in the study, and if so, for consent to their phone number being passed to me so that I could contact them to explain the research in more detail. The first eight phone numbers resulted in three unanswered calls, one unreturned message, two people saying they had changed their minds, and two young women

saying yes, I could go to see them. This high rate of having a change of mind between invitation and first contact with the researcher is the first example of possible resistance; being asked face to face by a person in a position of power, which the support workers had, to an extent, is difficult to refuse, and some people might have said yes just to appear compliant and obliging. They then have the chance to turn down a person they have never met, on the phone, and there are no consequences. I was not the gatekeeper to anything, so there was nothing to lose. The recruitment was purposefully designed this way so that young people did not feel obliged to take part and it was easy for them to refuse, this process being a way of trying to ensure as far as possible that those who took part genuinely wanted to do so, and consent was as informed as possible. Liamputtong (2007) notes that vulnerable people are at risk in research if they lack the ability to withdraw. She questions whether collecting data from vulnerable people can ever be ethical, but concludes that it is compounding their disempowerment if they are not heard at all. I would agree, and argue that by giving people the chance to change their minds in the days and weeks after first giving consent to be contacted, they also have time to reflect on whether or not to take part which is another step towards ensuring consent is informed and genuine.

I was aiming for a minimum of four families with an overall aim of having around 12 participants, so after the initial wave of recruitment resulted in two participants, I carried on recruiting until I had four family groups which comprised two mother/daughter pairs, one mother/daughter pair where the father of the teenager also took part intermittently, and one family group comprising pregnant teenager, her mother, grandmother and great aunt, with her father joining in occasionally. All these interviews took place in family homes. I also recruited a few other participants who were interviewed individually but where the snowballing out to partners and other family members did not result in agreements to take

part; this included a young mother who I interviewed alone for the first interview and whose partner took part in a joint second interview. In addition, I carried out five focus groups with young parents and parents-to-be in four locations in England. The first round of interviews began in 2012, and the follow up interviews were completed by 2014; focus groups were held during 2013 and 2014.

Data analysis used the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2014), taking an inductive approach whereby the themes are strongly linked to the data, and the analysis is data-driven. Having drawn out themes around stigma and surveillance, it became apparent that participants were positioning themselves in ways that they felt could counter discourses of negativity and powerlessness, so I re-examined the data to develop themes around power and imagework, which now inform this paper.

The study was given ethical approval by the relevant University Research Ethics Committee. In all the excerpts below, pseudonyms have been used to provide anonymity for the participants.

About the researcher

I am female, white, middle aged, and in the context of the families participating in the study, older than the grandmothers by several years, but with one child and no grandchildren myself. By virtue of being ‘from the University’ I would probably be regarded as middle class. I have a northern English accent, but despite many years living in the city where the interviews took place, had not acquired the distinctive local accent and therefore was clearly marked as an outsider by my voice alone.

Reflections on the research process

My original intention was to carry out face to face in depth interviews with individual young parents and parents-to-be, and then with their parents and if possible, partners. As well as one-to-one interviews, I carried out paired interviews, most often with mother and daughter, but once with the teenage mother and her partner, once with mother and daughter while her father wandered in and out to see what was going on and join in, and once with a whole family. When visiting people at home, researchers have little control over the setting; indeed, participants can be active in managing the process (see, for example, Coffey, 1999 and Luff, 1999). As I was interested in family life, and how decisions were made in families, I felt that these settings were actually more realistic, and gave insights into family processes that one to one interviews would not have provided. There was also the pragmatic issue of lack of alternatives; in a two or three bedroomed terraced or semi-detached house, there may not be alternative living rooms to use for interviews if all the family are at home, especially where downstairs rooms have been made open plan. In addition, when an interviewer is effectively a guest in a participant's home, it may not be possible to ask someone not to come into the room, and it may disturb the balance of trust and power to attempt to do so. My decision in each case was to allow the normal ebb and flow of family life to happen around the interview, and if other family members wanted to join in or leave, to accept this and include it in the account of the interview. Again, I felt that this gave a more naturalistic impression of family life that would not have been accessible in a more controlled and formal setting. Below is an excerpt from one of the family interviews where this ebb and flow happened. I was interviewing Tina, the mother of a teenage mother, in the living room; her husband Kevin was in the kitchen, decorating, but came into the living room to ask about what I was doing:

Kevin: (looking at me) Can I just ask you something?

Tina: What?

Kevin: Are you a social worker?

Tina: No.

Kevin: I'm just curious.

Tina: Well, go away then, go do the tiles.

Me: I'm a researcher at the university and what I'm interested in is family life, teenage pregnancies.

Kevin: It's a shame you can't put a word in for us with the council so we can have an extension built.

Tina: No! (laughing)

Me: Sorry, I haven't got any contacts at the council.

Tina: No, Kevin, go and play. Go!

This could be seen as an illustration of my possible multiple identities: a social worker, which I am not, although it might be expected that a social worker could be visiting to ask the sorts of questions I was asking; a researcher at the university; someone who might have influence with the local council. Note that Tina tells him to go away, not me. Firstly, I did not feel able to tell him what he could or could not do when I was a guest in his house; secondly, as I was interested in family life, I was happy for him to join in the interview if he wanted to. He did go back to the kitchen, but reappeared every now and then to join in or ask more questions. I returned the following week to interview Haley, the teenager in the household, and again Kevin came in and out of the interview when I was interviewing Haley and Tina together.

Access and resistance

One example of possible resistance has already been demonstrated, in that several people either did not answer their phone, or if they picked up the call, said they had changed their mind. These were all people who had indicated an interest in taking part, hence I had their phone number, but they may not have felt able to refuse participation when asked face-to-face by a support worker, as discussed earlier. When I managed to speak to some people on the phone, there was clearly a high degree of suspicion about who I was and what I wanted. One young woman answered and gave the phone to her boyfriend so he could tell me ‘she doesn’t want to be involved.’ Thus young people found a variety of ways to resist what they may have perceived as additional surveillance by someone connected with the TPSU.

One key issue concerning access centres on the Jones family, and demonstrates a certain amount of managing the research process by the participants, at the same time as what seems like an inability to deny access to an outsider who they perceived as having an official role. I had arranged to visit Debbie and her mother at home in the early evening. When I got there, Debbie (aged 17 and pregnant), her mother (Sheila), her grandmother (Eileen), and Eileen’s sister (Mary), were all sitting round the dining table, waiting for me. The house was a small terraced house, with open plan stairs leading out of the dining room, and sliding doors between the dining room and living room, where Debbie’s brother was watching TV. ‘You’re here to do a survey’, Eileen said when I arrived. I explained that I was not doing a survey, I was doing some interviews with young mums for a research study. It then emerged that Debbie had thought I was going to be testing her on her knowledge of childcare, and had asked her grandmother to come round and ask difficult questions about babies and childcare as preparation for the test that I would be setting in order to decide whether Debbie was capable of being a good mum, and should therefore be allowed to keep her baby.

When I reflected on this later, I was astonished that they had allowed me into the house. They thought I was going to be testing whether Debbie was a fit mother but still let me in.

Although this may be an illustration of a mistake in the recruitment process whereby the study had not been explained correctly, I would also suggest that this raises the critical question of whether some groups who expect to be under surveillance feel able to resist; can they refuse entry to a social worker, or a health visitor, or will that mark them out as bad mothers for not complying? I had been relying on introductions and contacts to be made by a gatekeeper who was known to the potential participants, but it appears that either she was giving out incorrect information, or the information about who I was and what I was doing had been misunderstood. The Jones family thought I was a social worker, or someone who had the authority to make decisions about child protection, and therefore may not have felt able to say no to me. Several studies have described how teenage mothers are deemed as at risk and therefore in need of surveillance, (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012; Breheny and Stephens, 2007) and that they feel under pressure to demonstrate that they are good and capable mothers (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012; Vincent and Thomson, 2013) particularly to a professional audience (Leese, 2016). It could be argued that they have been socialised into expecting to be the subjects of surveillance, and therefore feel unable to resist in terms of giving access.

Alternatively, the family strategy might have been less about feeling unable to refuse access, and more about a different form of resistance to judgement where they are showing a united front and demonstrating that they were a strong and caring family. On several occasions, Eileen and Sheila talked about Debbie having a great deal of childcare experience as a result of looking after younger family members. They also discussed the complex childcare arrangements that they planned to put in place to look after the baby and allow Debbie to

return to college, thus demonstrating that she would be well supported by her large kinship network. In this respect, they are displaying family (Finch 2007) by describing plans which ‘emphasize the fundamentally social nature of family practices’ (Finch 2007: 67), particularly demonstrating how there will be minimal reliance on a nursery or other childcare outside the family. Finch posed three key questions about why, how and to whom family is displayed. I suggest that the Jones family felt the need to display the strength of their family and how they will cope with the arrival of the new baby, partly because of their initial belief that they might be under surveillance from a social worker, even though I had assured them that this was not my role. Despite this assurance, they still worked as a family to present a strong front to an outsider.

Naomi, on the other hand, portrayed herself and her boyfriend Jamie as powerful enough to refuse access to someone with a formal role in the social services sector. They had not been impressed with the support worker allocated to them by the Teenage Pregnancy Support Unit, so when he rang them on the day their son was born, Jamie said they didn’t want a visit:

Our worker finally rang us the day I had him, unknown I’d had him, he rang Jamie and said ‘alright pal, how are you doing?’ you know, and Jamie said ‘yes, she’s had the baby’, and he said ‘well done, I’ll come and see how you are all doing,’ and he went ‘no, you are alright thank you’ and like he said politely ‘we don’t need your services no more, but thank you for what you have done so far,’ even though it was nothing. (laughs) (Naomi, aged 17, mother of 4 month old)

Despite this experience with their support worker, Naomi had agreed to take part in the interview with me, even though my introduction to her had been facilitated by another of the

workers at TPSU. This may reflect the complex relationship young parents have with the agency, which operates as a gateway to many of the services they can access, such as health visitors specifically for teenage parents, but might also be seen in some circumstances such as Naomi's as interfering and unhelpful. However, she was keen to understand my relationship with TPSU early on in the interview, questioning me before I formally began the interview about who had given me her phone number and what I wanted, and returning to that line of questions later when she wanted to clarify my role. In this case, my position as 'the girl from the university' worked in my favour as it seemed that she would not have agreed to let me visit had she thought I worked for Social Services.

Surveillance and image management

Teenage mothers have a stigmatised identity and are well aware of the judgemental media portrayals and social discourses within which they operate. As Wenham found, they are 'highly attuned to what people thought of them and why they might be treated differently from others.' (Wenham, 2016:9) Part of being treated differently involves expecting surveillance and judgement, which in turn leads to considerable and continuing image management. Expecting neighbours to be keeping an eye on them, Naomi and Jamie didn't want visitors who might be deemed official, and thus had refused the offer of a visit from their support worker.

The expectation of surveillance and judgement led to image management in terms of how they dressed when they went out, and how they behaved. Naomi had experienced bullying and name calling at school and in the street during her pregnancy and when her son was a newborn, and like Wenham's participants, was highly conscious of what other people thought of her.

If we're on our own you can do that [wear scruffy clothes], it's like teenagers do, but when you've got the baby with you, you have to think, you always have to think, what would everyone else think about what I look like today or what I'm wearing, what I'm acting like, what I'm doing, so you've always got to be conscious, you've got to care what everyone else thinks. Which isn't nice.

Thus, the expectation of judgment led to a constant need to present what she felt to be an acceptable image to the outside world. This assumption about being judged was reported by several of the young parents, and one of the major fears was that they would be reported to Social Services if they were unable to demonstrate good parenting. Banister et al (2016) discussed how young mothers choose clothing that will make them look more respectable and distance them from a stigmatised identity as a 'chav', as well as buying high quality fashionable prams and branded nappies. Where they cannot manage to do that, because of the expense of a good pram, they imbue second hand goods with valued identities, such as being family heirlooms rather than hand-me-downs.

Jacobsson and Åkerström (2012) discuss what they call a 'failed interview' where the interviewee took control of the process and talked in a way that was a clear presentation of a particular 'self'; assuming she had been chosen for the study because she lived on an estate which was known to be rough, she presented herself as representing her neighbourhood and only speaking about it positively. An interviewee can make use of an interview to tell an alternative story to the ones they perceive to be dominant, if they are part of a stigmatised group, in Jacobsson and Akerstrom's case someone from an estate with a poor reputation, and in the case of my teenage parents.

I would argue that the virtues of the qualitative interview, in Oakley's terms of it being non-hierarchical and where the researcher invests something of themselves in it, mean that it can enable a researcher to get beyond the image-work that is going on. As well as being keen to talk about what makes a good mother or father, the young people talked about hardships and about some of their bad experiences, so they did not simply present an image of perfection and happiness, although they often stressed how well they felt they were managing in the face of significant challenges.

In the context of an ongoing discourse about teenage parents where the dominant messages are about being irresponsible and feckless as well as being part of a much derided benefits culture, the performance of this image work indicates that young parents feel the need to present themselves as 'other' in order to counteract dominant negative images. As Wenham (2016) points out, they are highly attuned to these discourses. When discussing their hoped-for futures, they talked about returning to college, obtaining qualifications, and getting jobs that would enable them to provide for their families and give their children a good upbringing. Those who were on benefits were keen to stress that this was temporary, and that they did not fall into the stereotype of 'teenage parent'.

To be honest I see myself as a very educated person who can do better in life than to scrounge off benefits. I want what's best for me and best for my son. I don't want to be on benefits for the rest of my life and just because I'm eighteen and I'm pregnant don't put me in the corner. (Becky, aged 18, pregnant)

While expressing a desire to obtain qualifications and jobs, several of the young mothers also wanted to stay at home and be a full time mother until the point which they felt was

appropriate to leave their baby in the care of someone else; this ranged from one year old to their child starting nursery school. This demonstrates the complexity of the image work they feel the need to undertake: countering negative discourses about people on benefits by planning for a future where they study and work, while also living up to their ideals of motherhood.

In this sense, the interviews were sites where meanings were being actively created and performed (Denzin 2001), and where constructions of young people as good parents were being made. In Kristensen and Ravn's discussion of studies exploring women's experiences of pregnancy, the interviews in the successful study had 'functioned as a way for the women to process their pregnancy and reflect upon different aspects of it' (2015:6), and thus had a purpose for the interviewee as well as the interviewer. Ravn (2004) argues that the recruitment process, in particular the eagerness of women to take part, confirmed that 'pregnancy is perceived as an important experience in a woman's life and that it has become something which must be performed in certain ways' (2015:6). Although not a therapeutic encounter in the sense discussed by Birch and Miller (2000), participants in my study may have seen the interview as an opportunity to demonstrate the performance of good motherhood and actively counter the stigmatising stereotypes of teenage motherhood and the dominant negative discourse within which they knew they existed.

Concluding reflections

Some groups expect surveillance, either official or unofficial; teenage parents are one such group. This may impact on whether or not a researcher can gain access to members of the group. Gatekeepers or mediators may help in making contact, but may also inadvertently

skew the understanding of potential participants if they provide inaccurate information about the aims of the research.

Perceptions of the researcher are important when considering issues around access, particularly to vulnerable populations or individuals. The extent to which empathy can occur when interviewer and participants differ greatly in terms of age, class and perceived background is unclear; my status as 'from the university' was more useful than being seen as someone from the council or social services, and although an association with the university may have made me seem 'posh' my accent may have mitigated that. Despite that accent, it was clear I was not local, which meant I could play on a useful aspect of outsider status by being able to ask 'what it's like round here' without having the voice of someone who should already know.

Awareness that people who feel stigmatised or who feel themselves to be under surveillance as part of a stigmatised group may feel threatened or challenged by the appearance of a researcher, and may take action to mitigate that by asking questions to place the researcher. Although self-disclosure has been considered by some to be a false attempt at establishing rapport, in this project it was absolutely necessary to disclose who I was and who I worked for in order for some participants to feel comfortable with me.

Being perceived as someone who was not in an official role clearly had an impact on whether or not I was granted access and participants gave consent, particularly for Naomi. For others, such as the Jones family, agreeing to take part seemed to offer an opportunity to display the strong bonds they had as a family. Many other participants used the interview to demonstrate a counter image to the negative stereotypes attached to teenage parenting, suggesting that

consenting to an interview may be a way of asserting a positive image, and providing an opportunity for young people to establish themselves as ‘competent actors’ (Jansen 2015) and capable parents.

It is vital that researchers who work with vulnerable groups, or those who perceived themselves to be stigmatised and under surveillance, consider aspects of reflexivity in their approach to each stage of the research. This is particularly important as far as access is concerned, in terms of the power balance in the encounter, and the influence this has on consent. It should also be noted, however, that participants may feel that they should consent to an interview because of their position as a member of a group accustomed to being under surveillance, but that they can take the opportunity to use the interview to demonstrate their competence. Thus, to develop Liamputtong’s argument, interviewing vulnerable people not only counters the potential disempowerment of not including vulnerable groups in research (Liamputtong 2007); in this case, it is argued that it empowers them to challenge the negative stereotypes normally encountered in discourses of teenage parenting, thus subverting a sense of feeling bound to take part in an interview and turning the encounter around to assert a positive identity.

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