This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in Journal of Psychosocial Studies. The definitive publisher-authenticated version, Harris, P. (2019) 'Uneasy bedfellows? Fusing participatory and psychosocial principles in research with youth workers and young *people' Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 12 (3), pp.245-257 is available online at: https://doi.org/10.1332/204378919X15674407381128

Uneasy bed-fellows? Fusing participatory and psychosocial principles in research with youth workers and young people.

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Abstract

This paper charts an attempt to fuse two arguably incompatible formulations of social research; one rooted in a commitment to democratic, participatory practice and the other rooted in a psychosocial epistemological frame. After setting out the broad precepts of the two methodological approaches, the paper explores some theoretical and practical tensions that surfaced during a doctoral criminological study examining the desistance promoting potential of relationships between male youth workers and young men involved in violence. I show how the professional context in which the study was conducted (youth work) afforded the opportunity to work *with* participants whilst also retaining a psychosocial epistemological and analytic frame. The paper concludes that whilst the two approaches are likely to remain 'uneasy bed-fellows', more researchers in the youth work field might consider adopting a psychosocial standpoint as a means of keeping in sight both the psychic and social forces imbricated in young people's lives and within their relationships with youth professionals.

Introduction: participatory and psychosocial research methodologies

Traditionally, the youth work profession has been concerned to involve children and young people in any decisions affecting them (Hart, 1992) and to not construct them as subjects *in deficit* i.e. lacking knowledge (Davies, 2005; Jeffs and Smith, 2008). In their practice, youth workers seek to minimise the excessive use of worker power in the form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) or privilege accrued via membership of hegemonic social identities and professional status. This has coalesced into a drive to resist research methods that can have the effect of further stigmatising and pathologising young people already facing socio-economic disadvantage and lack of 'voice' (Bradford and Cullen, 2010). Such concerns have led me in my own previous work (author's own, 2014, 2016) towards a preference for participatory and peer research methods.

Participatory research was originally developed in the 1970s and 1980s as an alternative to large-scale survey studies that were perceived to give insufficient attention to people's local knowledge (Petty et al, 1995; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Kumar, 2002). Participatory methods are intended not just to enable the voice of local people (especially those who are marginalised) to be heard, but also to enable them to develop an analysis of their own conditions. As such, participatory researchers seek to accurately represent the constructions of research subjects, while also uncovering and ameliorating possible power relations between all parties involved in the research process. Common principles in participatory approaches include opening up the design

of the research process to include those most directly affected, the training and use of peer researchers from similar social backgrounds (Seal, 2018) and negotiating with participants what the data actually means and how findings will be shared (Petty et al, 1995). A key component of participatory research is the cultivation of a participatory *mindset* – a set of attitudes and behaviours – within all the stakeholders involved (Chambers, 1994). This revolves around the valuing of sharing and reflection - components that are integral to the development of a learning environment as the context in which, open, critical and democratic dialogue is fostered.

Whilst retaining an interest in themes of power and social identity, psychosocially framed research employs branches of psychodynamic thought (notably Kleinian object relations) to anticipate that the individual psyches of research subjects alter how these themes impact on them individually. At the opening of their book, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*, Hollway and Jefferson challenge qualitative researchers to ask themselves,

> What do you the researcher assume about a person's capacity to know, remember and tell about themselves? (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013, p1.)

This question arises from their conviction that the psychodynamic concept of defence mechanisms has significant analytical purchase when seeking to understand subjectivity and the life worlds of research subjects. In this formulation of subjectivity, the modern notion of a rational, unitary subject is replaced with a non-unitary *defended* subject, with unconscious motivations. As *defended* subjects research participants may *feel* they know a lot about their experiences and be able to recount

them, but this is not the same as knowing the reasons behind their actions. They may, for example, employ defence mechanisms such as denial or displacement to avoid facing up to the impact or source of their actions.

Hollway and Jefferson's distinctive interview method (the Free Association Narrative Interview - FANI) is based on the premise that the meanings underlying interviewees' narratives are best accessed via free association because such associations follow an emotional rather than cognitively derived logic. Interviewees are encouraged to recall whatever comes to mind even if seemingly irrelevant to the topic. During interviews an effort is made therefore to consider not only what respondents say but *how* they say it (so called "para-language"), what they struggled to say, and what they could not or did not say. FANI demands that the interviewer employs aspects of counselling and psychotherapeutic technique such as tolerance of silences, and extra sensitivity within transcription in order to capture changes of tone, hesitations and body language. Contradictions, inconsistencies and avoidances are captured and analysed to produce provisional hypotheses that then form the basis of the follow up interviews. Data is then analysed and interpreted by the researcher or possibly with colleagues, but not usually in conjunction with the participants.

The study

The study sought to explore the intersubjective dynamics of a key aspect of youth work practice - relationships between male workers and young men and how these operated in relation to young men's desistance (cessation) from violent behaviour. Desistance is, according to Maruna (2010), underpinned by *both* critical social determinants (e.g. poverty, discrimination, social exclusion) and internal, psychic

processes. These psychic processes include the 're-narrativisation' of self through 'redemptive scripts' and can involve the operation/influence of a 'blueprint self' in the form of significant others with whom the offender identifies. This suggests that questions of identity, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, along with pervasive structural factors, are pivotal to the desistance process.

Exploring the desistance promoting potential of youth work relationships in sufficient depth inevitably meant therefore engaging deeply with how the research participants – male youth workers and young men – were struggling with the constraints and possibilities of their personal and professional lives. A potentially distinctive feature of the research lay in seeking to shed light not just on the individual biographies of the participants and *intra* subjective processes (as within much life story work) but also the *inter* subjective processes within the relationships - that is - how both parties perceived each other and constructed meanings/discourses around their interactions. The intention was also to capture that dynamic change within the relationships across time as it occurred in situ and retrospectively, allowing for the complex mechanisms contributing to behavioural change within (and outside) the relationship to emerge.

Three male youth workers were selected who were, had been, or were preparing to, engage with young men involved in violence. These youth workers brokered access to four young men with whom they were engaged over a period of 30 months. The young men (and the workers) all had some history of involvement in violence.

Insert table 1 here

I anticipated that the young men could be resistant to acknowledging the impact of their violent behaviour on others, seeking to "neutralise" their actions (Matza, 1964). They might also be reluctant or unable to articulate how they perceived the adult male youth workers with whom they were engaged. I was concerned too that the workers would be keen to defend their own practice and how they would present their own histories of offending behaviour. Eliciting narratives from such participants risked inducing feelings of shame, regret or even pride, causing some to be evasive and guarded, making the production of meaningful data difficult.

A psychosocial conceptualisation of subjectivity as an underpinning frame offered a way to illuminate the inter-subjective, and sometimes unconscious, processes at work within such relationships whilst simultaneously incorporating how societal/institutional structures and working practices influenced these processes. Following the exemplar of other similar, psychosocial small-scale qualitative studies (e.g. Lucey et al 2003; Roseneil, 2006) it was decided to compile detailed, longitudinal analyses of the psycho-biographical specificity of the youth workers and young people, including their unique journeys prior to meeting each-other, the journey they took together and their retrospection on it too. This involved learning something of the relationships they brought with them to the one under study (in the shape of those they had lived through in their past with friends, family and figures in authority) and their individual paths into, and through, violent behaviour.

Throughout the research process, from selection of the sample, through to interviews and data gathering, analysis and dissemination, a number of theoretical, practical and ethical tensions and issues surfaced as a result of my attempt to fuse my participatory

principles with the psychosocial approach and the FANI method. These included tensions around how to equalise power relations between myself and the participants, how to handle data interpretation, and ethical issues about excessive intrusion into the participants' lives.

Thinking about power

I was keen to anticipate how indices of social identity and difference (class, age, gender, locality, generation, locality and race, etc.) would affect the dynamics of the research process, especially the relational dynamic between myself as a white, male, middle class researcher and the participants, all of whom were from working class backgrounds. In my previous work (authors own, 2016) I had sought to reduce such asymmetry in power via the use of peer researchers, emphasising social similarity between researcher and participants. During my fieldwork it soon became clear that conceptualising the power dynamic between myself and the participants required a stance which fully recognised the *intersectional* (Crenshaw, 1991) indices of identity and power within relationships. Reading our subjectivities simply through group membership risked not fully accounting for the intersecting nature of our identities and the psychic specificity of our experience.

As Harrison and Hood Williams (1998) point out, identity based on social groups is complex and has "more varieties than Heinz". The internal debates around identity within those social groups indicates the problem with assuming shared experience and views within the social group. As Walkerdine argues, "relations of power are not

invested in unitary individuals in any way which is solely or essentially derived from their material and institutional position or from their membership of certain social categories" (1990, p5). In Walkerdine's example, a female teacher is rendered at one moment powerful and powerless as result of how she is discursively positioned by four-year-old boys deploying sexist language in a classroom bounded by progressive pedagogic principles. She describes relations of power as "constantly shifting" "a back and forward movement rather than binary" (ibid, p1).

As soon as the interviews began it became clear that the relations of power between the participants and I were not binary and formed part of an ongoing, shifting process. I shared some professional and life experiences with the worker interviewees who were either students or ex-colleagues. My professional identity as a lecturer provided access and an opportunity to capitalise on pre-existing familiarity, trust and empathy, but these interviewees needed to adjust to my different role as researcher. Informal conversations outside recorded interviews included some acknowledgement of how indices of power along lines of professional roles and social identity were imbricated within our personal relationship. Maintaining reflexivity demanded that I acknowledge that whilst the workers may have felt comfortable sharing their stories with someone with whom they had built up a mutually respectful relationship, they might also have been keen to appear the most competent and effective as they could within their practice. They did seem to feel a need to retain the mutual regard we had already established with each-other and I was concerned they may only introduce me to young people who they felt they had had some success with. I needed to account for this dynamic in my analysis and also be wary of not imposing my own standpoint on

professional practice on the workers. I probably did not always avoid doing so, but I was at least able to lessen the impact of this by ensuring my own non-verbal communication remained authentic but neutral throughout the interview process.

All the young men were previously unknown to me. As cold contacts encountering a white, middle class, member of an educational establishment, there were undoubtedly moments early on where this created the kind of barriers to authentic engagement that more participatory and peer research methods might seek to dissolve. I was aware that the young men's perception of me as a university lecturer could have loomed large. I also anticipated that they could have perceived the research to have any number of purposes, some of which may have been accurate and some not, including tokenistic exploitation, surveillance and intelligence gathering for instance, especially as their prior experience of adult institutions and authority was nearly always negative.

This was somewhat mediated by the assurances given by the youth workers that I could be trusted. Participants did not include young people under 18 so consent was not required or sought from parents and guardians. This meant that youth workers were in effect operating *in loco parentis* and were part of the process of seeking informed consent from the young people themselves. Crucially they were also key to winning them round to the research objectives. Access to the young people was brokered through these workers, thereby generating a kind of "proxy trust" (Author's own, 2016).

Interviews with young men were not just conducted on a University campus but in neutral public spaces such as canteens and coffee bars and I was able to supplement

the Free Association Narrative interviews with some ethnographic observation of the worker and young men's relationships in these informal contexts. This gave me another insight into the relationships as both parties seemed less guarded and related to each other more freely, differently even, than when under the more formal gaze of an interview. My previous career as a street-based youth worker (15 years) working with young people in (and on the verge of entry into) the criminal justice system meant I was able to utilise some of that experience and training when interacting with young people. This helped establish rapport quickly. Their sense of obligation to the workers could have unduly influenced the young men to participate so the workers were briefed to ensure they did not exert such pressure. My own professional experience assisted in the monitoring of participants' emotional states and the making of judgements as to when participants were no longer comfortable with my presence in their environment, or their presence in mine. This did seem to reassure the young participants and put them at ease, creating avenues for meaningful engagement.

Throughout the research process, my own willingness and ability to examine my motivations and my own "conceptual baggage" (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, p32) was key to the avoidance of my own defensive reactions. Hollway and Jefferson admit that the idea of the 'defended' *researcher* was "weakly developed" in the first edition of their book. Dismissing any notion of scientific objectivity as quixotic, they underline that the question of what motivates researchers to inquire into the topics they choose should figure markedly in the researcher's reflections. Fontana and Frey (1998, p73) echo this sentiment, adding how openness and self-disclosure of such motivations can create dialogical learning for both parties.

> In learning about the other we learn about the self. That is, as we treat the other as a human being, we can no longer remain objective, faceless interviewers, but become human beings and must disclose ourselves, learning about ourselves as we try to learn about the other.

I soon recognised that my own experiences at school, which included some peer rejection and bullying, were part of my motivation to explore youth violence, and at times I shared this with the workers and young people; a revelation that produced differing levels of emotional responsiveness from the participants. I also explained that as a youth worker I had struggled to engage with young people entangled in similar behaviour, often feeling I had failed, and in some cases had seen young people enter custody, suffer injury and in one case, death. From the outset, I sought to bring these motivations to the forefront of my mind, in the hope that acknowledging them explicitly would bring them under greater critical control. This required me to remain attuned to how my own experiences could affect how I reacted to the workers and young people's stories, some of which were shocking. Some cases included descriptions of serious physical violence, non-consensual sexual activity, abuse and suicide. Whether I reacted with visible signs of approval/sympathy or disapproval/horror seemed to have some influence on their ongoing participation and how their narratives emerged. For example, one young person's story began within an account of him being a product of an incestual relationship. Being able to 'hold' this in a confidential, containing space seemed integral to his willingness to disclose further details.

All these emergent elements of the research process (an acknowledgement of intersectional identities, building on proxy trust, supplementing interviews with more ethnographic approaches; capitalising on professional experience and being willing to reflexively self-disclose) almost certainly were a product of the residual influence of a participatory mindset on my research practice. They did, in my view, significantly ameliorate the power imbalance within my relationship with participants, although not entirely.

Defended subjects and data interpretation

As a psychosocial study, it was premised on the belief that both the workers' and young people's practical/self-knowledge may be inferior to some aspects of theoretical knowledge. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) point out that if "self-deception is part of the human condition" (p90) when subjects deceive themselves, they also deceive others if those others take at face value what they say or do. Adopting this perspective on my research participants raised the question of how much the young men and youth workers really knew about their lives or relationships. This sat uneasily with my participatory principles. Although no deception was involved (I was not seeking to minimise reactivity by engaging in covert research) I knew that a psychosocial approach to data interpretation could involve the making of conceptual connections that the participants did not recognise or accept. The accounts they constructed, including how they perceived their relationship with each-other, had the potential to be flawed. This all meant that interpretation of data could paint pictures of participants' lives which they might not have fully recognised. For example, this

required accounting for how workers might lack insight into how work settings and contexts structured their activities and how there may be unintended consequences of their actions that emerge over time. Young people and workers might not wish intimate aspects of their life stories to be shared with the other in the dyad.

I was faced with the dilemma of whether I should or could feedback results to participants whose lives I was claiming to understand and how to ensure accountability to them. Not providing participants with the opportunity to contribute or challenge that interpretation (as I was used to in participatory research) left me feeling distinctly uneasy. However, I also knew this had to be set against the risk of over-reifying the participants' knowledge, avoiding analysis and simply reproducing their stories in unadulterated form, oversimplifying the issue under examination and possibly further dehumanising them in the process. I also felt that the overarching aim of the study - to strengthen the practice base of a profession and thereby contribute to a common good - needed to be weighed against any loss of power on the part of participants.

As I began to apply theoretical knowledge to the narratives I was again acutely aware of the need to consider how I was using the power imbued within that knowledge. This required acknowledgement of the dangers of bringing psychoanalytically informed theoretical precepts to the data such as the making of associations not explicitly present in the data and over interpretation or "wild analysis". This is a familiar charge – that the 'top-down' thrust of psychoanalysis where the unconscious is 'found' in the subject, combined with the risk of personal commitments that are too heavily invested

in to be open to examination, leads to certain specific and idiosyncratic ideas becoming over-valued and foregrounded.

If we accept that any research involves some form of hermeneutic interpretation and will inevitably involve the application of some pre-set theoretical concepts, the more pertinent question therefore becomes to what extent any such application can be justified. There are echoes here of critical concerns with pure phenomenology which highlight how dominant discourses permeate social life and come to frame how research participants view the world – concerns which have resulted in moves towards critical discourse analysis within my own previous work (e.g. Authors own, 2016).

In order to mitigate against these possible pitfalls, the approach taken to data analysis (as advocated by Hollway and Jefferson, 2013) was one that sought to view data as more than a sum of its constituent parts – an approach underpinned by the principle of 'gestalt'. The principle of gestalt posits that significance of any phenomenon is a function of its position in a wider framework. Parts of any system are defined by their relation to the whole in which they are functioning. In gestalt theory this focus on configuration, form, structure and pattern is rooted in a belief that it is impossible to achieve an understanding of structured totals by starting with only the ingredient parts which enter into them.

> "A mass of unstructured individual data are subjectively structured by the perceiver into wholes that have both form and structure. The person's actual experience is

> determined by the gestalt, rather than the raw pieces of data" (Wagner-Moore, 2004, p181).

With this in mind, instead of coding the scripts, interview and observational data was considered separately on a case by case basis. Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDA) did not appear to the best means to proceed once the transcripts had been completed. CAQDA affords a convenient way of holding data outside the mind and, as is espoused in grounded theory, a way to proceed from 'below' to 'above' to create hypotheses. The process of making links between the data is usually postponed until after the data is retrieved and coded. Arguably, this approach to analysis can lead to analytically significant segments taking precedence over the overall form and a degree of de-contextualisation, with certain ideas becoming foregrounded. Keeping the parts *and* whole of long, complex narratives in mind and seeing their place in a wider context can become difficult.

Instead I read and re-read the individual transcripts in conjunction with youth work, desistance and psychosocial literature, noting my initial thoughts, especially where I saw unconscious defensiveness or relevant psychosocial concepts next to the text in the margin. The next stage involved writing edited, descriptive *pen portraits*, highlighting significant extracts from the interviews. These portraits acted as substitutes for the raw data in a more digestible form and provided the means to notice the inconsistencies, contradictions and puzzles within the narratives, helping them come alive for me as the researcher, as well as the reader. The portraits were then read and re-read in conjunction with field notes and other sources (such as

workers' written reflections) during the next *interpretation* phase. As the interpretive process began to surface meanings in the data, each case revealed patterns, some expected and some unexpected. Insights that emerged later in the process led to revisions of earlier interpretations. This non-linear approach to analysis sought to leave room for some ambiguity throughout, rather than the making of bald assertions too early or without empirical support. The interpretations were then held together in mind and formed part of a final *immersion* (Miller and Crabtree, 1994) deep-thinking stage of 'living with' the stories which often incorporated walking and thinking in an attempt to engender synthesis of their disparate elements into a whole.

Research participants' comments made in informal conversations during the whole process also fed into my personal interpretations. These were then offered for discussion with colleagues from other methodological traditions, including youth and community work, who offered their alternative interpretations. This helped to ensure that my interpretation was informed both by a dialectic between psycho-social theory and alternative conceptual frameworks. The results evolved into a typology of relationship dynamics and worker/young person subjectivities that was then reflected in the overarching structure of the thesis. All data was then made available to full scrutiny by fellow researchers on-line allowing for external judgements to be made as the extent to which any claim to robustness was supported by empirical evidence and how the theory was applied.

The youth and community work field in the UK could be said to operate as a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) that encompasses certain notable norms and

conventions. In the case of the workers, they had all (to a greater or lesser extent) undergone training programmes with the building of reflective ability as a core competence. Student youth workers are (at least in theory) placed in practice placements under the supervision of qualified or more experienced practitioners and encouraged to engage in critical reflection on experience through the use of reflective techniques such as writing (e.g. Moon, 2004).

As a long-standing member of that community myself, I found that these norms inevitably began to permeate my methodology and how it was mediated through to the participants. As the study progressed, a more dialogical, collaborative approach to data interpretation surfaced. Hoggett et al (2010) seem to have had the same experience when working with a sample of community workers. They too found themselves moving towards an increasingly dialogical stance, sharing their thoughts with participants because, as ex-community development workers themselves, they felt "uncomfortable excluding [our] respondents from the process of 'doing research'" (p175). One of their worked examples included a youth worker - David - engaging in reflection as to why he felt out of place in certain professional contexts and making connections to his own biography. Over an extended period of time and a number of interviews the research team were able to assess the value of some of their interpretations with David and their other participants, developing relationships where the workers were able to gain insight into their own working practices. Hoggett et al characterise these evolving relationships as an "epistemic alliance" with "heuristic power" (p183). They do stress that if this alliance is to include dialogical sharing of

thinking and interpretation, careful consideration needs to be given to how this sharing occurs, such as bearing in mind the defensive organisation of the participant.

During all the data interpretation stages in my own study, more opportunities to share these interpretations and mitigate the marginalisation of interviewees in the process emerged than I expected. It became clear that rather than my interpretations being perceived as restrictive or disempowering, some of the participants experienced the increased self-knowledge the interpretations offered as empowering. In the case of the workers, they had all (to a greater or lesser extent) undergone training programmes with the building of reflective ability as a core competence. With some of the worker participants, their commitment to reflective practice and participatory mindset did make it possible to test the value of my initial interpretations by returning their transcripts to them to read and comment on. In one instance, I decided to share interview transcripts with a worker who later confessed they were “really hard to read” but this led on to fruitful further reflective conversations that he felt enhanced his practice. With other workers I judged my interpretations of their narratives to be too at odds with their self-image. At points during one interview, a worker became visibly upset and said that I was “messing him up”. By the end of the interview he recovered and indicated he had found the experience cathartic. Despite giving serious consideration to sharing my interpretations with him and consulting with colleagues I concluded that his investment in a bona fide professional persona and heavily gendered defensive organisation would make the process of shared data analysis too burdensome for him.

The young people selected for the study, all of them who had been, or were still, involved in violence, had not been formally or professionally schooled in reflection, but some were encountering encouragement to reflect on their biographical experiences within their relationship with youth workers. In some cases, this was a key facet of how the youth workers were seeking to induce changes in their violent behaviour. Mutual trust and empathy between first the workers and I and then, over even more time, the young people and I, began to produce an emotional and psychological climate that could tolerate some challenge to views of self and at least a rudimentary willingness to accept constructive criticism. The research sought to chart the presence or growth of such reflective ability in both parties, as this was integral to the production of meaningful data and the research question. This context meant that as the interviews progressed it did become possible to share some of the findings with the young people too, allowing speculative findings to be further examined collaboratively.

Thinking about harm and consent

Employing an interview method such as FANI that sought to focus on participants' avoidance of certain topics, identify projections and inconsistencies in their responses and look for signs of emotional disturbance, could arguably be said to amount to a psycho-analysis of participants without their expressed consent to engage the services of a psychotherapist. Unlike psychotherapists who in clinical settings interpret into the encounter for the benefit of their clients within the therapeutic relationship, psychosocial researchers generally save their interpretations for outside it and for a

very different audience. This generated considerable tension as to the extent to which the youth workers and young people should be exposed to this scrutiny and potential harm, and how they could meaningfully give their informed consent to such a process or be considered to fully participating in it.

I was especially concerned that each party's growing awareness of how the other party viewed them through the process of research could potentially have resulted in a degree of distress and emotional intrusion. In therapy, client upset or distress triggered is managed as part of the process. These ethically complex scenarios led me back to Hollway and Jefferson's honest self-appraisal of their study of the fear of crime (2013). They had also encountered some of these same uncomfortable questions. Is it always harmful for research participants to experience being upset or distressed? Should participants remain unchanged after their experience of the research? They argue that distress and harm are not equivalent and should not be conflated because the impact of surfacing emotion depends on the relational context. They maintain that "well-being depends on making the causes of distress conscious, in a containing environment" (p90) and that distress can be the "midwife to truth" (ibid, p91). Clearly drawing on some experiences as therapeutic practitioners (or maybe clients?) they argue that the choice to reveal personal issues is a product of a continuing dynamic between two people. The experience of talking about personal, emotionally difficult issues in a supportive and trustworthy context could be cathartic for research participants and maybe even lead to them positively seeking further help.

I felt this demanded a conceptualisation of informed consent based more on participants' evolving feelings about the research and me as the researcher throughout the research process, rather than at just the beginning. As my research progressed, those participants who did remain in contact with me confirmed that they were finding the process increasingly valuable. Despite moments of distress, the support I was able to offer as part of our relational dynamic and the opportunity to talk freely did seem to significantly ameliorate that distress.

It was more difficult to ascertain how those who chose to withdraw were affected and this worried me. As Hoggett et al (2010) warns, some participants did need sensitive and skilful handling. One young man withdrew completely from the research process after the first interview, stating that he was not "in the right mental state to discuss things right now". All participants had given their informed consent and the fact that their involvement was voluntary was continually restated. That said, such admissions made for some uncomfortable decisions as to how best to ensure their well-being and how to compassionately and fairly represent and disseminate their narratives. I came to the view that their autonomous decision to withdraw at least illustrated that they clearly understood their right to do so and had taken the appropriate action to safeguard their welfare. All participants were given pseudonyms and specific details in case studies, particularly those that could make someone identifiable, especially to colleagues, friends and family, were removed. However, the use of pseudonyms was not seen as a catch-all. As participants did not retain the right to veto what data was placed in the public domain, this obligated me to be sensitive to their needs, protect their interests and to consider how the results would be received in the public sphere.

Whilst recognising the overarching desire to advance public understanding I therefore chose to withhold certain aspects of all the participants' narratives from wider dissemination.

Conclusion: Towards a participatory psychosocial research?

Previous proponents of psychosocial research methods have articulated a distinctive outlook on ontological, epistemological and ethical questions but have until now paid somewhat limited attention to youth and community work, with some notable exceptions (Hoggett et al, 2010). This attempt to fuse a psychosocial perspective with dialogical participatory research shows how youth researchers and practitioners still committed to participatory values might seek to balance ethical and epistemological dilemmas thrown up by a psychosocial approach in ways that are compatible with their democratic, dialogical principles. I have set out how this might be done: keeping in mind how intersectional differences between researcher and participant impact power asymmetry and can affect data gathering and analysis; building on 'proxy trust' through the use of brokers ; supplementing free association narrative interviews with more observational and ethnographic methods; making use of reflexive self-disclosure by the researcher; adopting gestalt principles in data interpretation and capitalising on the emphasis on reflection and reflexivity within professional communities such as youth and community work.

These methods might conceivably amount to an approach to qualitative research that, if not identifiably 'different' from that set out by Hollway and Jefferson, can at least be seen as augmentation of their model that expands its utility into hitherto under-

explored professional areas. Although tensions remain and psychosocial and participatory research are likely to remain 'uneasy bed-fellows', more researchers in the youth work field might consider adopting a psychosocial standpoint as a means of keeping in sight both the psychic and social forces imbricated in young people's lives and within their relationships with youth professionals.

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