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# RESEARCHING YOUNG LIVES: METHODOLOGIES, METHODS, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES IN YOUTH STUDIES

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# RESEARCHING YOUNG LIVES: METHODOLOGIES, METHODS, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES IN YOUTH STUDIES

The Youth Research Centre (YRC) plays an integral role in the development of research projects, research publications and researcher training in the fields of sociology of youth and sociology of education and within the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE), at the University of Melbourne. Our team includes PhD candidates, early career researchers, mid-career researchers, professors and emeritus professors.

The aim of this series of reports is to showcase the variety of research methodologies, methods and perspectives that our researchers engage with. Each report includes three case studies. Our aim is to cover a range of methodologies and topics that may be of interest to students and early career researchers in the disciplines of education and sociology and, particularly, within the field of youth studies.

Within each report, each case study is a snapshot of an actual research project currently being conducted in the YRC. Our researchers are sharing their experiences and offering their advice for conducting social research in an increasingly complex and diverse societal environment. The practices presented in this series of research reports reflect the innovative and contemporary research methodologies and methods undertaken by YRC staff and students. Some of the methods illustrated here are traditional but employed in new ways; while other methodologies and methods depart from conventional research practices to cover more innovative practices to investigate and understand the multidimensional ways of being young in the twenty-first century.

This report includes contributions from Tamara Borovica, Anneleis Humphries and Ron Baird. In the first piece, drawing on relational materialist ontologies, Tamara Borovica explores the use of dance as a creative method to interrogate young women's embodiment from a feminist perspective. Tamara

conducted a performance ethnography with university students interested in creative methods and feminist issues to explore the potentiality and the 'ongoing becomings of young women's bodies'. In this highly creative research, she takes us step-by-step through her research process to illustrate how dance, movement and creative aesthetics can subvert the notion of bodies as passive objects but rather as having the capacity to 'feel, think and act in ways previously unimaginable'. In the second piece, Anneleis Humphries draws on Freire's critical pedagogy to contest the notion of young people as passive subjects but rather creators of their own present and future. Anneleis also takes us step-by-step through her research, from data collection to data analysis, to contest views of youth as disengaged with their social circumstances, to illustrate the high awareness of the young people in her project of their role as active actors in shaping *the* world and *their* world. In the final piece, Ron Baird discusses the challenges of conducting research with hard to reach groups of young people. Ron addresses the challenges of navigating research with public organisations, and in particular the difficulties of negotiating with the organisation's gatekeeper to access the site and participants. He painstakingly describes the tensions between organisations' and researcher's needs and interests and provides useful advice on how to successfully manage this tension.

Overall, these three chapters on researching young lives are a significant addition to the vibrant field of youth studies. They represent the Youth Research Centre's continuous support, contribution and engagement with high quality research and practice for, with and by young people.

**Jenny Chesters and Hernan Cuervo**

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# WHAT CAN METHOD DO: CREATIVE INVESTIGATION OF THE EMBODIMENT OF WOMANHOOD THROUGH DANCE

Dr Tamara Borovica

## THE RATIONALE BEHIND A CREATIVE RESEARCH ON THE EMBODIMENT OF WOMANHOOD

This research uses dance as a method to explore and problematise young women's embodiment from a feminist perspective. Drawing on a rich history of feminist research on the body (Grosz 1994, 2017; Bray & Colebrook 1998; Braidotti 2011, 2013), I seek to contribute to advancing a more inclusive perspective on the embodiment of womanhood by emphasising the potentiality of what young women sense, feel, think, imagine and do. This is not to say that embodiment or womanhood are all about positives and potentials; rather it is to shift the focus from problematisation to more inclusive analysis where often chaotic multiplicities participate in shaping people's realities. In doing so, I develop a rhizomatic, diffractive and aesthetic exploration of the embodiment of womanhood that evolved through collaborative performance ethnography with a group of tertiary students interested in creative methods and feminist issues.

My intention behind this research is to problematize narrow conceptions of embodiment which repeatedly define women's bodies as inert, passive objects upon which culture writes meanings. Young women's bodies as I imagine and encounter them in this research are neither finished nor passive, and the meanings that inform, challenge or produce them are not static. I understand the bodies of young women who participated in this research to be creative, productive and enabling, working through an assemblage of matter, meanings, relations, knowledge, and actions. To explore ways in which young women create their bodily beings, I draw from relational materialist ontologies to inform dance as a way of knowing and as a method in this research, with creative writing as a means of sense-making.



Photo no. 1: Dance as a way of knowing

The question that inspired this research is: *What knowledge about bodies and gender can be created through creative research that focuses on fleeting, sensory and affective dimensions of embodiment?*

## CREATIVE, NON-REPRESENTATIONAL RESEARCH ON THE EMBODIMENT OF WOMANHOOD

To explore the ongoing becomings of young women's bodies, I turned to creative methods. I suggest creative, aesthetic methods as a potent mode of social inquiry that provides a space for moving through and between perceptions, emotions, images and thoughts, and, thus, provokes bodies to think, feel and act in new ways. By surprising us with new sensations, feelings and thoughts about a phenomenon, creative methods open up a liminal space for imagining what was previously unimaginable. Creative methods thus allow a certain freshness of experience, taking one by surprise, shocking, confusing, touching, nourishing, provoking, and, in doing so, inviting one to rethink their ideas about themselves, the other and the world.

In this research on the embodiment of gender, creative methods provoked a reimagining of how bodies come to be and how gender comes to be. They facilitated a look at the ways bodies affect each other and produce each other. By sensing with our bodies and thinking about gender in movement (while dancing), the participants of this research, myself included, were invited to 'think outside the boundaries of "majoritarian" thought' (Hickey-Moody 2007, p. 93) - in other words, to think beyond the binary categories that understand the body and gender in fixed, dualist terms (body-mind, women-men, thought-emotion, and interiority-exteriority). The creative aesthetic method created a space where we could move away from simplistic notions of passive, gendered bodies (bodies that are produced by the world), to reimagine what a body can do, and how things, bodies, concepts, and energies continuously make and remake possibilities for embodiment and gendering (active bodies).



Photo no 2. Dancing with the stratification

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## DANCE AND WRITING AS PROCESSES OF CREATIVE DISCOVERY

In choosing to work with creative embodied methods, I seek to bring the elusive, intangible, sensory and affective dimensions of embodiment, and thus of being in the world, to an analysis of womanhood. I aim to create a space for exploring the fluidity and relationality of being (including gendered being). In thinking with our moving bodies in this research we practised attuning to flows of sensory, emotional, cognitive, imaginative and other information that taught us something about our bodies, our ways of being (including our ways of gendering) and our ways of relating to others and to the world at large.

Dance method facilitated the inquiry into the relationality of becoming, and into the ways in which bodies get to produce each other. It provided an entry into an apprehension, rather than a comprehension, of rich non-verbal processes that are part of the ongoing production of bodies and gender. Finally, it facilitated a collaborative exploration of the messiness of embodiment (of gender, and of living). Creative writing, particularly poetic analysis that emerged as a mode through which to share data, made the exploration of the asynchronous, multisensory becoming that we experienced in dance inquiries possible and perhaps more palpable. In writing poetry, I work with the traces of affect that were left on participants' bodies, and on my own. Poetry offered itself as a way of simultaneously working with multiple data and of bringing into my analysis the elements of aesthetics that were produced in our dance workshops.

## PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY

To explore the complex entanglement of natural and cultural in young women's bodily becoming, I conducted a performance ethnography with a group of 15 university students interested in creative methods and feminist issues. The participants in this collaborative performance ethnography were young women aged between 18 and 25, students at the University of Melbourne who volunteered to join the study. We were a mixed group of students from various cultural and class backgrounds, and with various levels of dance experience and knowledge of gender issues. The participants and I formed a collective of what I call non-dancers (amateur dancers) who danced to produce and explore feelings, thoughts, ideas, sensations and/or creative artefacts about embodied womanhood.

Before recruiting the participants, I submitted an Ethics Application to the University of Melbourne Ethics committee. Given that my project involved university students aged between 18 and 25 years and did not include any of the specified vulnerable groups, the approval process was relatively straightforward. After receiving approval from the Ethics Committee, I recruited the participants by posting a carefully crafted poster to various information platforms such as Melbourne university online and offline information boards for students, Facebook pages of student organisations and dance communities in Melbourne, and inviting potential participants to

join one of the two information meetings held prior to the project commencement. The information meetings gathered about 20 young women out of which 15 decided to join the research.

The non-representational nature of this empirical work did not call for a 'representational' sample as this research does not aim to create a representational picture of some kind of objective reality. The point of non-representational research, such as this one, is to redirect attention from meanings of representations towards the materiality and relationality of things, to look at what things and events (or assemblages of things and events) do, produce or enable, rather than what there is and what it means.

## RESEARCH EVENTS

The performance ethnography consisted of six dance workshops followed by a series of small group conversations. The movement workshops provided an opportunity for this small collective to gather every two weeks and dance for two hours in a facilitated environment. My diffractive orientation formed the basis of our collaborative work; while I facilitated our dance inquiries in each workshop, what was collaboratively *produced* in each of the workshops became a provocation for the next one.

Workshops usually began with a long, guided warm-up to ease our bodies into movement, and to help us transition from thinking about movement to a flow of emergent, improvised dance. Once there was enough flow in the room, I would introduce a topic and we dance and sense our bodily responses to various elements of the embodiment. Some of the topics we explored were women's bodies and womanhood, bodies in space and place, stratification of women's bodies, socio-material production of womanhood, and women's bodies across the life span. The question we always danced with asked *what is this particular dance/question/activity producing for you?* then came an invitation to *follow whatever comes up* (that is, perceptions, feelings, images, ideas, or creative actions). Whatever was produced and brought into our collective work led us to a further inquiry.

Close to the end of each workshop we would sit in a circle and talk about what *happened*. Consistent with my non-directive style of facilitating movement workshops, I did not direct our conversations much but would rather follow the themes that emerged and provide space for everyone to say what they wanted to say.

## THE DIFFRACTIVE ORIENTATION

Davies, in her reading of Barad, imagines diffractive methodology as an attempt to 'illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter' (Barad 2007: 30, as cited in Davies 2014). This attuning to emergent differences assumes following what they open and what they close, how they matter, when and for whom. It means looking for what differences do, rather than what they mean or signify. It also means looking for captivating

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differences rather than for meaningful sameness, and following how differences continue to emerge differently (how something surprising emerges and then changes or blends with something else). The meaning that emerges from this kind of research does not exist prior to or independent of an encounter; thus, the researcher's task is not to tell the world of this truth but to 'become with' it. This means that I as researcher will always be entangled in the production of the research event and in the meaning-making processes.

## NOTING, TRANSCRIBING AND EMERGENT MAPPING

Following each workshop/conversation, I took extensive notes. Sometimes my attention was captured by a theme to be further explored in the research, a puzzling moment with someone/ something in a research encounter, an affective atmosphere, or a resistance that was not voiced but could be felt. Some of my notes were very brief, while others consisted of several pages of detail that felt significant and would not be captured in the visual materials. These notes became a forum for my ongoing becoming-with complexity of each of the workshops and of the themes that we collaboratively explored in this research.

I audio- and video-recorded all dance workshops and most of the conversations with participants. I watched videos of each workshop numerous times, taking notes on whatever caught my attention. I looked for creative movements (or their lack), facial expressions, group formations, patterns of connection or disconnection, sights or words and anything that drew my attention among the multiplicity of things happening simultaneously on the screen in front of me. I used audio-recordings to make detailed transcripts of conversations following each workshop, then I would look at video recordings to add detail about how someone spoke and what they spoke about to my transcript and eventually to my analysis. When writing, I enriched my working space with photo images taken during workshops, often writing while listening to the music playlists that I created for this project. In doing this, I wanted to immerse the fullness of my body in thinking-feeling-creating the analysis. In some sense, my multiple transcribing formed a rigorous play with the multisensory data and an early experimentation with what the data could do.

In my diffractive mapping of emergent data, I looked for anything striking, surprising and unexpected. In doing this, I followed MacLure (2013) and other posthuman, postqualitative researchers (Mazzei 2013, Davies 2014, 2017) who advised paying attention to singularities, irregularities, emergent differences, entanglements of matter and meaning, and anything surprising, with a sense of wonder. I wrote poetry and took long pages of very short notes (a few words per observation) to keep my thinking-feeling-becoming-with this analysis as open as possible. I worked hard to overcome my need (and previous training) to make meaning of the data that captured my imagination and to follow instead where it took me next.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, I would like to suggest creative innovative methods in social research as a way of working with the fleeting, intangible and affective dimensions of socio-material worlds. Particularly, as a way of provoking bodies (those of researchers, participants, audiences) to feel, think and act in ways previously unimaginable. If social sciences are to explore the dynamics of being (becoming), experimenting with methods that acknowledge the unpredictability and unsettledness of research processes seems pivotal.

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# USING FREIRE'S CULTURE CIRCLES TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE

Anneleis Humphries

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Young people are often overlooked when it comes to valuing contributions to their community, however, adolescence is also the time in which an individual becomes independent of family and explores deeper their roles and relationships to wider society. It is also a key time to understand their own capacity and roles in contributing to their community. Using Freire's (2000) critical pedagogy, this research explores what early adolescents see as the social forces limiting their social contributions, as well as how they perceive their own ability to connect and contribute to positive social forces (Monteiro et al. 2015). This research is guided by the following question: What do young people (aged 12-15) want to see in their society and how do they understand their own capacity to contribute?

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Drawing on Freire's (2000)'s critical pedagogy, I focus on the relationship between individual and social development, looking not only at how the development of young people's capacity is influenced by their environment but also how they can develop skills to create a positive influence. To achieve this, an exploration of their desired futures and how they see themselves contributing to the creation of this future was undertaken. Understanding the interdependent nature of the development of an individual with their environment can serve to empower individuals. In particular, developing this understanding during one's adolescent years may be particularly powerful in encouraging the development of capacities aimed at the betterment of society.

## METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

A series of surveys and workshops were used to create a dialogue between students. Three different groups, based on year levels, were gathered from each school; each group engaged in a dialogue with their peers about their community. Conducting research with secondary school students required approval from The University of Melbourne Ethics Committee, the State Education Research Applications Process, school principals, students' parents and the students themselves. Overall, gaining all of these approvals took 18 months. After approaching 12 schools, three agreed to participate. In those schools, students were recruited by teacher selection or self-selection, depending on the preferences of the school. Schools in which students were teacher-selected were given guidelines about including students who were representative of the school, while in the self-selected schools, students were asked to sign up after a short Assembly presentation. Each of the potential participants was given an information letter and consent form for their parents to sign. Students were also required to complete a consent form. A total of 80 students in three schools participated in this research project. Three workshops were held on the school premises during school hours. The format of the workshops were as follows: introductions including what they appreciated about society today; principles which would allow the workshops to run

effectively; individual time to answer a set of predetermined questions about their desires for their own future and the future of their local, national and global communities and what communities and individuals would be able to achieve in these circumstances; discussions stemming from the students identified goals; and discussions about how they and their peers might engage in the creation of these futures. While the goal was to engage each group in workshops on three separate days to allow time for students to think more deeply about these ideas between workshops, one school found scheduling this too difficult and ultimately requested to do all workshops on the one day.

Three surveys were completed by the workshop participants. The aim of these surveys was to identify attitudes and behaviours around their involvement in the community and how important they viewed that involvement. The survey undertaken at the beginning of the first workshop asked students to share their attitudes and behaviours in and around the community and the importance of their actions in their neighbourhood and the world more broadly. The survey undertaken at the end of the last workshop also included questions about attitudes, to see if these attitudes had changed throughout the workshops. Students were also asked to reflect on their experiences during the workshop. A third survey was undertaken 6 to 12 months after the completion of the workshops which provided an opportunity for a more longitudinal perspective. Students were again asked about their attitudes and behaviours regarding the community, and if they had been able to put into practice anything that was discussed in the workshops.

During the workshops, students were asked to critically examine the implications, causes and effects of particular social forces, as well as how their ideal futures may impact various aspects of society. Through this process, they were asked to see themselves and their peers as protagonists in the community and explore what working alongside their fellow community members might entail. The workshops served as 'culture circles', providing a space for these young people to engage in critical dialogue, to explore ideals and to identify barriers in the creation of those ideals. The discussions also explored possible avenues for action that they could pursue, as well as how they, and others in the community, could support these efforts.

This method encourages a critical awareness of one's social reality and how they affect one's life, and can contribute to their capacity to effectively respond in a manner that is conducive to the betterment of their own, and others' lives (Freire 2016). This process also empowers individuals to critically evaluate their own thinking and behaviour to understand inherent oppression therein.

While a continual process of action and reflection was not within the scope of this research, discussions were undertaken around possible actions they could undertake. It is these actions, in conjunction with reflection, that Freire terms as praxis, and which provides the foundation for effective social transformation. As such, it was hoped that these young people would not only have

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the opportunity to engage in dialogue of these matters, but also, after the workshops, realise their own capacity and find opportunities to put their beliefs into practice.

## USE OF FREIRE'S CULTURE CIRCLES

Freire's culture circles are about creating a space in which individuals can interrogate their reality (Monteiro et al. 2015). Students' existing knowledge is accepted as valued and valuable, and teachers build on this knowledge through critical dialogue in a way that enhances learning and creates meaning (Monteiro et al. 2015). For this research, culture circles were created through students identifying qualities they thought valuable to the creation of a conducive space – qualities such as respect, acceptance and listening were commonly identified. Students were then asked to draw on their own knowledge and ideals to engage in a discussion about how to improve their community.

Some students acknowledged how their peers' ideas were valid, irrespective of their own agreement on the matter. Others disagreed more directly, yet did so in a manner that showed respect for the individual. The discussions generally touched on the current manifestations of their ideals, as well as the underlying principles which were lacking, and which needed to be put in place. For instance, in discussions about gender inequality, students often cited the pay gap, social expectations and power discrepancies that are evident in society, as well as the principles of equality and acceptance of difference which they expressed as underlying existing injustices.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The culture circles provided rich data to be transcribed and coded. The coding was undertaken using a multi-stage process, not only looking at what themes were discussed but also how they were discussed, as well as at what point during the workshop they were discussed. For this study, an understanding of young people's perceptions of their society was sought. Furthermore, the importance of young people's understanding of their own capacity to contribute to their community. Participatory culture circles allowed students to develop trust between students as well as with the researcher providing greater depth of dialogue (Singh et al. 2014).

Coding of both direct statements and indirect observations provided an understanding of the interconnectedness of certain themes, as well as the importance of outliers in challenging of the framework (Taylor et al. 2015; Miles et al. 1994; Pearce and Larson 2006). Initial coding simply looked at emerging themes, considering not only the theme at large, but specifics of what they were discussing (Taylor et al. 2015). For instance, most groups discussed the concept of equality, yet there was a diversity in the ways that the subject was discussed, including gender, sexuality, race, and creed. Coding these different conversations in Nvivo demonstrated not only the breadth of topics that were discussed, but also the depth (Taylor et al. 2015).

Looking at how each topic was discussed was the next stage. Once each theme was coded, all relevant quotes on the same theme could be analysed together. Different ways of speaking about each theme then became more obvious.

Further insight was gained by examining the different stages of the workshops, and how student ideas developed throughout the dialogue. For instance, the individual question time at the beginning of the workshops was conducted without a significant level of dialogue occurring prior. The way in which students talked about certain themes in this context, often differed in relation to the workshop discussions, or the survey taken at the end of the workshops. By examining these in detail, evidence emerged about the effectiveness of the dialogue of a culture circle in increasing critical awareness.

Throughout the coding and analysis process, engaging with theoretical perspectives provided greater insight. How did these young people see the relevance of social virtues in light of community progress, as explored by Fukuyama (1996) in his book about the importance of trust? What capabilities did they believe were important to personal and social development, in the context of Sen's (1990) capability framework?

Analysing how each discussion developed shed insight into how they were able to connect certain ideas to their own realities. In a few of the workshops, for instance, the idea of oneness was discussed - thinking of each country and each individual in the world as one. Many students shared concerns about the barriers – prejudices for instance – as being insurmountable. Yet when the macro level of discussion was brought into the context of the micro – in this case when the simile of a family was used to explain this oneness – all of the students came to realise that this was achievable.

Finally, further insight was gained by looking at the interaction of the participants. Examining individual statements provided some insight into how students perceived certain concepts. By examining the dialogue and negotiation between students – seeing where they disagreed, and how they reiterated ideas to develop mutual understanding in the group – allowed an insight into the relationship between social and individual development of ideas.

## CHALLENGES

One of the biggest challenges in analysing the data was to ensure authenticity of student voice. Drawing on the critical interrogation approach of Freire assisted to overcome this challenge. When examining the words of the students, careful consideration was given to understand the context in which the statements had been made, to interrogate them in light of the different conceptualisations offered by various theorists, and to draw on other moments of the workshops to deepen understanding.

Culture circles and critical dialogue are critical aspects of Freire's

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work which were able to be incorporated, however these are only the first step for Freire (2000). The importance of continued action, reflection and learning based on that action had very limited application in this context. The time restraints on this research meant that each school could only be visited up to 4 times, with most of those visits undertaking a critical exploration of their future communities and how they see their contributions to those communities. In-depth critical explorations of this nature can be time-consuming. Given the time limitations as well as the support and logistical requirements to accompany young people to undertake actions to better their community, true praxis as envisaged by Freire was not possible.

Future research with greater scope could provide significant benefits in empowering young people to be active contributors to the community and transform their belief in their own capacity. Despite a strong sense of powerlessness that many of these young people expressed throughout the workshops, as the critical dialogue continued and practical actions were identified, many of these young people expressed a great level of enthusiasm for their intended engagement. Further, they were able to see the enthusiasm and insight of their peers and identify who could support them in their efforts.

## CONCLUSION

The young people engaged in this research demonstrated significant insight into their reality - they were not only able to demonstrate a reading of the word, using Freire's words, they also demonstrated a reading of their world. These young people showed critical insight not only into some of the social issues facing the world, but also some of the underlying social forces that contribute to these issues. Environmental sustainability, one of their major concerns, was discussed at great length by numerous groups of students as a rising crisis facing the global community. In many of these discussions, there was also acknowledgement of its complexity. The discussions explored the importance of education and raising awareness as key in overcoming some challenges such as waste management and reducing single-use plastics. Perhaps more importantly however, through these discussions they started to see themselves as protagonists in the process.

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# A CASE OF BAD TIMING: NEGOTIATING ACCESS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH WITH HARD TO REACH YOUNG PEOPLE.

Ron Baird

## INTRODUCTION

Stories are a way of knowing that allow for the gathering of detailed documentation of lived experience that researchers analyse in an effort to make meaning from them. Therefore, the process of selecting details of human experience lies at the heart of ethnographic enquiry in which one seeks to document individual or communal social phenomena (Fielding, 2001; Hammersley, 1990). In order to hear stories one must enter into a relationship with individuals, communities or organisations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Murthy, 2008). Researching human subjects also raises a number of significant challenges especially when it comes to negotiating access to hard to reach populations, particularly young people on the margins of society. Thus, in order to hear the stories that create the data of ethnographic research, the researcher must find willing participants.

To locate potential research participants the researcher often has to work with a 'gatekeeper' organisation or individual (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In working with 'gatekeeper' organisations the researcher can encounter power and closely guarded control of the proposed research site as the gatekeeper holds the key to accessing the proposed research cohort. Gatekeepers are defined as "those individuals in an organisation that have the power to withhold access to people or situations for the purposes of research" (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1997, p. 171). As I have experienced, trying to negotiate access to research participants via a gatekeeper is a complicated business. This paper is based on a reflexive account of my experiences of the challenges of negotiating access with hard to reach young people, focusing on the intricacies of a three-year relationship with a Council Youth Services team who were working with me to facilitate access to a group of gang-involved young people in their community.

## THE STUDY

When I began my study, I never imagined how difficult it would be to gain access to a group of gang-involved young people. However, that said, it is broadly recognized that conducting research on marginalized young people poses unique methodological challenges (Blackman 2007; Valentine, Butler and Skelton, 2010; Russell, 2013). The issue of gaining access to an appropriate research cohort is a little discussed methodological issue in the qualitative research literature; significant enough to mention, but not enough for further elaboration (Cipollone and Stich, 2012: 22). As Cipollone and Stich (2012, p. 23) point out, access is "a topic that is indisputably one of great importance but typically written about in a limited manner and within limited space." However, there is a small but growing body of literature that is beginning to address the issue of access, this most fundamental aspect of conducting qualitative research in the field, particularly

research using an ethnographic approach (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012; Cipollone & Stich, 2012; Reeves, 2010; Russell, 2013; Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008). Joan Cassel (1988, pp. 93-95) has divided field access strategies into two phases 'getting in', that is achieving physical access to the field site of the study and 'getting on' achieving social access to research participants. Gatekeepers are instrumental to both 'getting in' and 'getting on' in ethnographic field research.

My initial PhD research proposal was an ethnographic study on how youth gangs formed in an Australian suburban context. I had partnered with a Youth Services team in a local government council. Utilising a local government council was essential to accessing the proposed research participants. However, in attempting to access gang-involved young people, I had to navigate the complex process of gaining clearance to conduct the research from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and therefore having the support of a local government council as the gatekeeper was essential as it provided a number of assurances to the HREC that the research interviews would be conducted in a safe environment staffed by trained youth workers who could step in and assist if necessary. Safety in this case is paramount for the subject participants but also for researchers. On the flipside of this, a researcher has to contend with the possibility of the highly politicised nature of local government who can attempt to guide and shape the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

In negotiating access to the field site, I attended several meetings with council youth workers and community engagement officers at the Council. During these meetings we discussed what the youth workers were experiencing with the two cohorts of seemingly gang-involved young people and what we hoped to get from the research. At the initial meeting, the youth workers expressed their concern regarding youth gangs in their municipality. I was informed that there were two prominent youth gangs active in the area. One comprised of Anglo-Australian background young people who were described to me as 'the children of the last of the £10.00 Poms'<sup>1</sup> and another made up of more recent migrants of Sudanese background. The youth workers expressed their eagerness to support my research, as it would assist them to achieve a Key Performance Indicator related to the theme of 'safer young people'. At this meeting, I was provided with a copy of their *Youth Strategy* and a report examining the prevalence of street-present young people who were perceived to be problematic by the community. This perception was corroborated by the Acting Team Leader Youth Programs and Events.

During the initial meetings to negotiate access, I was provided with verbal assurance that I would be given full support for the conduct of my research including introductions to key players in the two gangs who were known by the youth workers, access to their youth drop-in facility, opportunities to ride along with their mobile youth outreach team who conduct site visits to places

1 Working class British migrants who came to work in the factories of Australia including Melbourne's western suburbs in the Post-World War 2 period (Hammerton & Thomson, 2005).

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where groups of young people congregate, including gang-involved young people, such as shopping malls, car parks, the train station and local parks. At this stage the Youth Services Team indicated that they were fully on-board with the project and willing to act as a 'gatekeeper' to the research participants as they saw it is an opportunity to gain insight into what was happening for young people that led to gang involvement and to ascertain and alleviate associated social problems in the community.

## CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

In July 2013 I began preparations for my entry into the field as the Human Research Ethics Committee had recently granted approval for my research to go ahead subject to the provision of support from the Council. I thus made contact with the Youth Services Team leader and found that the Youth Services unit had undergone an intensive organisational review and restructure that resulted in the appointment of a new Youth Services manager. I then contacted the new manager to communicate the legitimacy and significance of my proposed research.

Unfortunately, changes in leadership in any organization can also mean changes in policy directions that might affect the possibility of conducting research in that space. Thus, when I contacted the Youth Services manager, he denied the existence of any form of street gang in the community preferring to identify street-present young people as youth groups, not gangs, and mentioned that a neighbouring area had a 'real' gang problem. He also stated that he had some concerns regarding the conduct of the research in the municipality, which primarily stemmed from a concern with how the City would be represented and a desire to have the City represented in a positive light in relation to perceptions of community safety. As the conversation unfolded the manager articulated two other concerns: researcher safety and my definition of a 'gang'. He highlighted that "that there is a difference between delinquent behaviour of a youth gang and that of true criminality." The manager did however state that the Council intended to honour the undertaking of support for my research.

I subsequently met with the Youth Services Manager in person and was provided with a letter of support which was required by the HREC. I then met with the Council's Youth Development Team Leader who tried to convince me that any youth groups present in the area were not 'gangs'. The Youth Development Team Leader stated emphatically that:

"there are just no gangs or gang like youth groupings here; there used to be some issues with youth gangs, but they have now dissipated. There might be gangs again in the future, but there are just none now. Sorry, it seems to be 'case of bad timing' for you as you have entered the field during a trough in gang activity. Good luck with your research" (Council Youth Services, 31 October, 2013).

My attempt to gain access to a cohort of young people on the margins illustrates the challenges of conducting research with hard to reach young people. As a qualitative researcher, one intends to address a research problem and in so doing apply rigorous critical analysis to provide ways forward to a potential solution to a social problem or further our understanding of a particular social issue. My initial interactions with the 'gatekeepers' in this proposed study led me to assume that upon entering the field that I would be welcomed and that my research project would potentially provide an understanding of the position, attitudes and motivations of a group of at-risk young people. As a result of a change of 'gatekeeper' and his resistance to my research on gang-involved young people considerably delayed my project. Despite my assurances of anonymity for the subjects and place of research and my abiding by the ethics code, the gatekeeper feared that the research might tarnish the image of the community. This is not an uncommon feeling among members of a community. Well too often marginalised social groups, communities or individuals can be represented through a deficit lens. How to balance your research interests and the needs of the community is one of the key issues in social research.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned are that 'gatekeeper' organisations have their own needs that are not always in synchronicity with the interests of researchers; which might produce a roadblock to the researchers' plan (as in my case) (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). In reflecting on this experience, it is important to highlight some recommendations for researchers, particularly student researchers, intending to conduct research with hard to reach young people by working with any organisation. I would highly recommend that in the early stages of negotiating access with the gatekeeper ensure that you get an agreement in writing, preferably before applying for Human Research Ethics approval. Also, take detailed notes of all meetings, conversations and other correspondence (telephone, email, verbal) and send them to the gatekeeper for verification and clarification.

Maintain contact with the gatekeeper in the interim period between negotiation and entry to the field. During the six months that it took me to complete my confirmation and gain approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee, the Council Youth Services Team was reviewed and restructured and I missed the opportunity to ensure that the new Youth Services Manager was supportive of my proposed research project.

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## CONCLUSION

Conducting research with hard to reach groups requires the assistance of gatekeepers. Therefore, the importance of nurturing relationships with these key people is a vital component of the research strategy. After my research project was blocked by the Youth Services Manager of that particular council, I then contacted another local council who opened the door to a new and exciting challenge by allowing me access to a cohort of young people who were involved in a Graffiti and Street Art mentoring program. The experience and knowledge gained through the process of engaging with the initial gatekeeper and the subsequent gatekeeper, though difficult at the time, has enhanced my understanding of the complexities involved in ethnographic research.

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