‘Big Brother welcomes you’: exploring innovative methods for research with children and young people outside of the home and school environments

Mansfield, C., Jackson, L., Mayblin, L., Piekut, A., & Valentine, G.

Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University’s Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:
Mansfield, C, Jackson, L, Mayblin, L, Piekut, A & Valentine, G 2015, '‘Big Brother welcomes you’: exploring innovative methods for research with children and young people outside of the home and school environments' Qualitative Research, vol 15, no. 5, pp. 583-599.
https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1468794114548947

DOI 10.1177/1468794114548947
ISSN 1468-7941
ESSN 1741-3109

Publisher: Sage

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

This document is the author’s post-print version, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer-review process. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.
“Big Brother Welcomes You”: Exploring Innovative Methods for Research with Children and Young People outside of the home and school environments

Abstract
This paper discusses some of the challenges involved in conducting research with children and young people outside of the home and school environments. We respond to the need to develop new child-centred research techniques which move beyond existing power relations among children and adults by anchoring our approach in the idea of mystery. The paper reports on research utilising a mixed-method design which includes one new technique – the Big Brother diary room. We discuss the unpredictable nature of the fieldwork, reflect on the ‘messiness’ of the research process, and critically evaluate our own research design.

Keywords: mixed-methods; children-centred research; children and young people; reflexivity

Research with children
In the 1990s, researchers who worked with children moved away from ‘traditional’, ‘adultist’ research methods, such as one-to-one semi-structured interviews, and towards ‘child centred’ approaches (see for example Mauthner, 1997; Hall and Ryan, 2011). These child friendly methods were based on children’s preferred methods of communication, for example drawing, photography, stories, and song (Barker and Weller, 2003a). Such methods were part of an attempt to be more respectful of children, approaching them as competent participants rather than underdeveloped communicators (Mauthner, 1997; Valentine, 1999; Darbyshire et al. 2005; Skelton, 2008). The focus for social scientists working with children has, since this time, tended to be on empowering children and young people, breaking down the researcher-participant power relation and increasing their knowledge and understanding of the research process with a view to expanding the possibilities for consent.
Kirk (2007) explains that there is an increasing interest in involving children and young people in the research process which has been influenced by the recognition of children’s rights, and by the reconceptualization of children within the social sciences (as active agents rather than as passive objects of research). Treating children in this autonomous way, Darbyshire et al.’s (2005) research suggests that children need to feel an active part of the research, knowing why they are involved and to what ends (i.e. what will be done with the data they produce). Darbyshire et al. (2005) therefore focused their approach on letting the children lead the research, allowing them to choose how to facilitate focus groups. Others have gone to even greater lengths, seeking to involve children in the whole process from research design to dissemination (Alderson 1995, 2000; Warming 2006; Holland et al. 2010).

This turn to child-centredness has more commonly led researchers to use, and create, research tools which will make the process of participation fun for children and young people. There can, however, be drawbacks to using ‘fun’ methods, and, as Punch (2002a: 323) points out “such techniques should not unquestionably be assumed to be more appropriate for conducting research with children”. For example, drawing exercises may not suit older children or those who are self-conscious about their abilities, and diaries can produce highly variable data with some participants recording little of relevance to the research project (Barker and Weller 2003a; Fargas-Malet et al. 2010). Many researchers therefore advocate the application of a multi-method research design which helps to reflect the diversity of children’s experiences and competencies by age, background, and ability (Barker and Weller 2003a; Punch 2002a; Punch 2002b). Furthermore, experienced scholars continue to urge others to be reflexive in the successes and failures of their research design,
and open in research publications about what does not, as well as what does work (Darbyshire et al. 2005; Skelton 2008; Fargas-Malet et al. 2010).

While scholars often recommend that children should be more than ‘subjects’ of study, suggesting that they should participate in the whole project, many researchers find when they enter the field that sustaining, or even initiating the involvement of children can be very difficult in practice (see for example, Cree et al. 2002). Barriers to involving and empowering children can include a lack of interest in the research on the part of participants, lack of time, limitations imposed by gatekeepers, and restrictions determined by the research context. While children are at school most days, research in extra-curricular settings such as youth clubs, which children attend voluntarily, sporadically, and for a vast range of reasons, with leaders who work voluntarily, and deliver provision on limited resources can be very challenging in terms of stimulating long term engagement (see Askins and Pain 2011). As Barker and Weller (2003b) therefore point out the spatial context in which research is undertaken with children can have significant implications for the quality of the data (see also Fargas-Malet et al. 2010). Though this does of course apply to adults as well, the fact that children’s lives are largely controlled by adults, and are based mostly in school and at home, means that these contexts and the power relations within them, are important to bear in mind when entering the field (Valentine 1999).

In this paper we take up the call for researchers to have a greater willingness to report reflexively on the messy and unpredictable nature of qualitative research with children, and to critically evaluate the success (or otherwise) of our own research design (Darbyshire et al. 2005: 418). We also contribute to the literatures on spatial context, discussed above, by moving beyond the school and the home, to a third context which is inhabited by children –
an extracurricular activity club. In the case of such spaces, issues such as the politics of access, of consent, and of power relations, take a different character to the more commonly researched school and home settings. Indeed, the challenges involved led us to develop an innovative research method which does not attempt long term engagement.

The paper draws on data gathered from a large, multi-staged research project on encounters with difference and understanding when and how a ‘meaningful encounters’ occur. As a part of the research we developed links with a community centre in a city in the north of England – an interfaith youth project for young Christians, Jews and Muslims which brings young people of different cultures and religions together to break down ethnic stereotypes, encourage friendships across religious groups and build a feeling of community.¹

“Big Brother Welcomes You”

Knowing that the organisers of the voluntary project with which we were working did not have the capacity to facilitate engagement over a long time period, that the young people in their project changed, and that they had recently scaled down from weekly to monthly meeting, meant that the possibilities for engaging participants in the research process over a long period of time were very limited. In response to these circumstances, we needed a research design that could provide a one-off, fun evening for participants, which also garnered strong research data. Our research is concerned with encounters across difference and we were interested in the extent to which these young people of different faith backgrounds had experienced ‘meaningful’ contact through the project, contact which had

¹ Details of the broader research programme of which this research is a part, including grant identification number, will be inserted prior to submission (at this stage it would remove the author’s anonymity)
challenged their previous views and broken down prejudices or preconceptions (Valentine, 2008). We also wanted to reflexively explore an innovative research method which would challenge some of the now established assumptions about working with children as research participants – that power differentials are always bad, that honesty, openness and understanding should be at the heart of the research process (as opposed to mystery and purposeful concealment), and that children necessarily need to be involved at every stage of a research project for it to be successful. In short, we wanted to use child centred methods in that the experience of taking part was fun for participants, which would play on children’s tendency to become excited about mystery.

Our idea was based on the Big Brother diary room concept, which was originally popularised as part of the British based Channel 4 reality TV series, but later became an international phenomenon. A ‘diary room’ would be set up, with a hidden voice asking questions, and a camera placed in full view in front of the participant. Within this context mystery and concealment would be an essential part of the research process, which we believed would be exciting for participants. In pilot work with this youth group we had found focus groups and interviews to be unsuccessful. As Punch (2002a: 325) has observed, “children are not used to expressing their views freely or being taken seriously by adults because of their position in adult-dominated society. The challenge is how best to enable children to express their views to an adult researcher”. This led us to speculate whether both the breaking down and reinforcement of the research-participant power dynamic – removing the teacherly adult and replacing them with a mystery voice – would allow young people to speak more freely. In exploring this we followed Punch’s (2002a: 323) suggestion that researchers should engage in critical reflection “in order to explore the advantages and
disadvantages of how they work in practice and the implications for analysis of the different kinds of data that are generated”. As part of this exercise we embedded the Big Brother activity in a mixed method research design including standard face-to-face interviews with a researcher, drawing, a ‘secret box’, and participant observation. The mix of techniques was designed to both offer opportunities for evaluating our innovative method within the context of established approaches and to offer variety to engage young people’s interest and produce maximum data from a single research event.

We sought to maximise the potential for individuals to participate by using mixed methods (cf. Ajodhia-Andrews and Berman, 2009). Firstly, the drawing element involved a table with pens, pencils and a selection of both directed worksheets which offered opportunities to draw or write answers to questions such as ‘meeting other faiths is good/bad because’ or drawing ‘me and my friends at [project name]’, as well as blank paper which allowed the young people to contribute anything they chose. A researcher sat at the table and spoke with the young people to introduce the task, but did not monitor what was being done. As the young people could choose what activities they took part in within the research setting (a Jewish youth centre, which sporadically hosts the group) – playing football or table tennis, playing on a games console, taking part in our research – they drifted in and out of this activity as they chose. Most, however, did choose to draw or write something. Secondly, we used a ‘secret box’ (see Punch, 2002); the secret box involves placing a box in a visible location where participants can post their written thoughts and drawings privately, without having to hand them to a researcher. This approach can further empower children to take part as they feel that their secret is safe from others present. Another researcher undertook
participant observation through the whole session and directed volunteers to the interview room.

A third researcher undertook traditional one-to-one semi-structured interviews as a primer to the Big Brother diary room. This offered the opportunity to gain formal written consent, for the young people to ask questions privately, and for comparative data to be gathered between the diary room and the standard interview. The interview was recorded and took the style of a chat about the children’s lives outside of the project (their age, faith, where they live, who with etc) and then the extent of their engagement with the project as well as their experiences of taking part in interfaith activities. When in the Big Brother diary room participants were asked to sit in front of black sheeting facing a video camera (see fig. 1). They were left there and when the door closed a fourth researcher, who played the part of Big Brother and sat behind the black sheeting, welcomed them and introduced the fact that they would be asked a series of questions but that there were no wrong answers.

Figure 1: Constructing the ‘Diary Room’ (Source: Author’s own).
We had hoped to follow the ideal model of obtaining both parental and child consent, through ‘opt-in’ (Valentine 1999). However, as other researchers have found (see Morrow 2008), compromise sometimes becomes necessary in the field as gatekeepers can feel that it is their right to determine what level of consent from parents is necessary. Indeed, some argue that this is their prerogative and should be respected (Skelton 2008). In practice, then, meeting high ethical standards is not always possible. In this instance, though we had access to all of the children, we had no means of contacting parents, and such access was not made available to us. We urged the organisers of the youth project (one for each of the faith groups) to pass consent forms to parents, but only one of the three believed this to be necessary – we received a pile of consent forms from Jewish parents, but none from Christians or Muslims. As it became clear that certain organisers deemed parental consent unnecessary and would therefore present a barrier to obtaining it, we focussed on participant consent, believing that ultimately we need to respect children’s decisions and place the focus on their autonomy and decision making capacity to engage (or not) with research (Valentine 1999; Skelton 2008). This decision facilitated the research, ensuring autonomy and agency for the young people rather than with an external other controlling their decision-making capacity.

Obtaining participant consent involved explaining to the group in advance what would be happening and making it clear that only those who wanted to should take part, followed by a one-to-one chat prior to going into the initial standard interview, and then another explanation and check, followed by the signing of consent forms before the interview taking place. It is difficult for researchers to anticipate the ethical dilemmas which will arise during
the course of the research but we took Morrow’s (2008) lead in seeing ethics as “situational and responsive” (p. 52), and sought to overcome potential problems in the field as we saw it. Using a range of methods also enabled the young people to participate in certain activities and not others, allowing them to choose how to express themselves and which activities to opt in to. It is important to state that the young people were made well aware of what the research would involve. Though they knew that Big Brother would be asking them questions. It was the precise nature of the ‘diary room’ (what it would look like, who Big Brother was) which was used to create mystery, increasing excitement and interest.

Over a three hour session, 15 people contributed drawings or pieces of writing, and 11 people were interviewed and went through the diary room. This left us with over 2 hours of video material, 30 drawings or written contributions, 3 hours of participant observation (plus 6 hours previously gathered), and 1.5 hours of interview recordings. Participants were male and female and ranged from 10-16 years of age. They were mixed Jewish, Christian and Muslim, and were from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and residential areas within and (in one case) beyond the city in which the project is located. Interviews and diary room data were transcribed verbatim, coded and analysed using qualitative data software.

**Reflections on the research design**

In this section we reflect on our mixed method research design before discussing the innovative Big Brother method in more detail in the next section. Elwood states “mixed methods are rooted in a unique hybrid epistemology, rather than a strategic collision between separate epistemologies” (2010: 98); therefore “no one research strategy could account for the multiple ways in which methodological enquiry could be laid out” (Jackson
Knowing which is the right approach is often a challenge for researchers, but many researchers who work with children advocate a mixed method approach approach (for example, Darbyshire et al. 2005). Nevertheless, the way in which methods are brought together within different research projects varies according to both the context and the research questions under consideration (Jackson 2011). Structuring our research to incorporate the number of considerations detailed above resulted in numerous positive dimensions which may be attributed to the introduction of innovative techniques for working with children and young people.

The approach taken here created a new experience for the children involved and ensured a high level of excitement and enthusiasm regarding their involvement. Many participants were particularly interested in the ‘novel’ method of the Big Brother diary room, over and above more familiar activities such as drawing. The variety of activities available to participants also allowed us to better reflect and represent the diversity of the group with which we were conducting the research. The group were from different backgrounds, of different ages, and had multiple interests; using mixed methods therefore meant that individuals could participate in a way that suited them. For example, quieter children could write their perspectives down for the secret box or could sketch their ideas, whilst those who were more confident were able to talk to Big Brother or to the researchers directly. This approach meant that we were able to work effectively with the limited time allotted to the research.

A single method approach, such as interviewing, might alienate some individuals who do not have the confidence to talk to ‘adults’, while drawing exercises can facilitate the expression of thoughts and ideas which are difficult to communicate in words (Tolia-Kelly, 2007;
In this context the drawing exercise garnered mixed results. Not all participants in our research became involved in the sketching exercise, which may have been due to the presence of gatekeepers or due to the age of the children present. As Punch (2002a) discusses, older children may not get involved in sketching exercises, seeing it as ‘babyish’, whilst others might be conscious of their ‘abilities’. A few younger participants were happy to be involved in sketching exercises and sat at the table with paper and drawing materials. However, older children tended to focus on other activities, with some taking part in Big Brother, whilst others continued their normal practices at the youth centre. One older participant (female, 16) was particularly concerned with her artistic abilities, becoming more frustrated at getting her drawing ‘right’. After discarding several attempts she decided not to submit her sketch for fear that it wasn’t the ‘right answer’. The lack of enthusiasm for the sketching exercise might also be associated with the number of activities on offer for the children in this space. Therefore the data collection was challenged by the presence of multi-sensory activities that were present at the same time.

The secret box proved popular, with a number of children writing their thoughts down and dropping them into the box. However, we found upon opening the box after the event that many of the responses towed the ‘tagline’ of the organisation and felt this did not accurately reflect what the children felt about working with others from different backgrounds. For example, participants wrote such things as “speaking to people of different faiths is good because you get to learn and spend time with different people and cultures”, while in the interviews they expressed other opinions. This suggests that this task perhaps too closely resembled school work, leading the young people to submit what they felt were the ‘right answers’. The short semi-structured interviews that were conducted before the
children entered the Big Brother diary room gave a good insight into the children’s views, with few participants appearing uncomfortable speaking with an adult. This setting facilitated a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Eyles 1988 in Flowerdew and Martin 2005: 111) allowing the researcher to not only shape and direct the conversation, but also to further probe issues that arose as part of the conversation.

The participant observation also provided useful information. Participant observation alone can provide rich information regarding encounters, allowing researchers to engage with and/or observe individuals in more natural settings and capturing glimpses of social identities through performativity (Whatmore 2003). Observing the ‘active performance’ of identities and relationships here enabled the researchers to gain further perspective on how the group’s leaders facilitated contact between different groups and therefore allowed us to analyse the operational practices of the group.

The importance of spatial context must also be considered (Valentine 1999; Barker and Weller 2003; Fargas-Malet et al. 2010). The space in which the research was conducted was one in which the children and young people have more agency than at school, and one clearly characterised by different dynamics than the home. This meant that they had some freedom in their choice of activity within the space, and that though the space was familiar to them, it was not a part of their everyday life. Conducting research in this environment meant that concerns regarding uneven power relations between researcher and participant were decreased. In this setting, the young people were to some extent ‘in charge’, with group leaders largely sitting back and watching the scene unfold. The young people present were under no obligation to take part in the research, participating in other activities if they preferred. The activity space therefore remained the young people’s, with the research
team controlling only a small portion of the space for Big Brother (which was not normally utilised by the group, as well as putting some tables together at one side of the room (see the sketch in fig. 2). Those who were interested were able to speak with the research team and demonstrate their willingness to participate. Such freedom and agency around issues of participation thereby ensured that the space was not dominated by the researchers. The young people were bound only by the (very fluid) rules in place by the youth centre with which they were already familiar.

The presence of gatekeepers in the room where the drawing activity and secret box were located had both positive and negative implications. Whilst organisers attempted to help us ‘facilitate’ the research, their presence also had a negative effect. Whilst adopting an ‘opt-in’ principle for the children, facilitators often felt the need to ‘persuade’ some to get involved. This might be seen as undermining the ethical groundwork which we had explained to the children. Further, the gatekeeper’s presence at the sketching table, or more predominantly on one side of the room, might also have impacted upon participation levels (Woodcock et al., 2009). The informality of the research context did, however, facilitate more relaxed interaction between gatekeepers, researchers and participants. Such an approach in this type of setting also allowed for reflection from multiple members of the research team who observed different elements of interaction.
Though the activity took place in a setting to some extent ‘owned’ by the young people involved, this had its own limitations in terms of impact upon our data collection strategy. With so many activities to choose from, a number of individuals decided not to participate, preferring to play computer games, football or snooker. Though our ‘visit’ was the central focus of the evening, for some of the children present this was their first visit to this particular space. The novelty in activities available became a distraction, with participants more interested in activities beyond the research. Though facilitators (of the youth group) attempted to raise interest in the activities being offered, participants focused more on social mixing (the central aim of the youth project). Here, participant observation proved to be the most effective data collection method allowing us to understand the broader dynamics of the group at work.

Maintaining the interest of individuals in a chaotic space is therefore a key issue in such research contexts; interest was fleeting and reflected not only the attention span of individuals but was also impacted by noise, movement, discussion with others and the
sociability of the space. Whilst some individuals actively participated in the different tasks, responding to discussions with members of the research team and ‘props’ such as the secret box, others did not. In this way, a more structured research environment which responds to the needs and strengths of children’s encounters might facilitate more engaged and detailed research material. A more structured (and individual) approach may bring order to the ‘chaos’ of conducting research in ‘children’s spaces’. The Big Brother diary room was therefore utilised as a method for engaging the children present in an environment in which ‘traditional’ power relations were disrupted. We discuss this approach more as an activity which sought to overcome issues of focus, attention, duration and dynamic engagement with the young people present in the next section.

In sum, utilising a mixed method research design facilitated the collection of in-depth, detailed data that went beyond description or the re-presentation (of participants). However, whilst Holliday (2000) argues that innovative visual methodologies can counter the traditional power dynamics of other methods, our attempts to shift the power relations and mix up the different approaches did not always work well in this particular context. The time involved with the group (here one session rather than a longer term study) has a direct impact on the data collected. Other researchers, documenting methodological challenges of working with children (Cree et al. 2002), discuss the challenge of stimulating long-term engagement from younger participants. However, short interactive sessions might come with their own challenges. Whilst a sustained period of research with the group may have allowed for further reflection on the part of the researchers, the exercise that took place contained a degree of novelty (and indeed mystery) for those involved, thereby allowing the space to be somewhat transformed. Additional time, however, would have allowed for
further participation of all individuals present at the group and would have ensured that other activities available (such as football, basketball and computer games) might not be in such direct competition with the activities designed by the researchers, which promoted active (albeit self-selective) participation.

Reflections on the ‘Big Brother’ method

Whilst using appropriate methods is of concern for all researchers, there is great enthusiasm within children’s research to develop and use fun ‘child-friendly’ methods, as discussed earlier. This was in part the impetus for the research team when developing the Big Brother method. The team wanted to create a method that the children would find exciting and would facilitate them in expressing their views and sharing information. This presented some interesting methodological issues both in terms of the data collected, and from the particular perspective of the researcher acting as Big Brother. In this section of the paper we reflect on the use of the Big Brother method. We move between the first-hand experience of the researcher acting as Big Brother, and the more general reflections on the Big Brother method shared by the whole team. The researcher’s first person account of their Big Brother reflections is shown in italics and we return to roman text to make wider connections.

_The Big Brother method represented a novel research situation for myself as Big Brother, and for the rest of the team. At the start of the project I experienced concerns about the process of data collection, and self-doubt about my own research skills. These concerns were rooted in my own lack of experience in using this new method. This was reinforced by the difficulty that the team had in organising a_
session at which the gatekeepers would allow the data collection to take place, and when the children were available. I was acutely aware that I had one-off opportunity to conduct the Big Brother interviews, and that there was little room for error. I was also conscious that whilst I am from a generation who grew up with Big Brother and who are highly familiar with the concept, some of the children that I was to interview were much younger and would probably not be aware of the concept.

This sense of pressure was emphasised when the research team arrived at the interview venue to find that the room available was not as it had been described. The set up of the diary room had been carefully planned by the team in advance based on the description of the room provided. We were told that a recording studio was available, with a window looking in from the outside. We had assumed that, as with most recording studios, the window would be accompanied by a speaker system into the room for communication between producer and musician. This was not the case, reflecting the messiness inherent in undertaking fieldwork (Billo and Hiemstra 2013). As such, the team had to quickly adapt their diary room design to fit the space provided whilst ensuring that the children would not be able to see Big Brother in the diary room and that the two could still clearly hear each other.

Adaptability was also required during the interviews. The children were asked by Big Brother to select an envelope with a question in for them to answer from a choice in front of them. The envelopes were numbered from 1 to 8 and Big Brother told the participant which envelope to open. Many of the envelopes contained questions regarding neighbourhoods in the city, asking the children to describe what these areas were like. These questions were included because we had been informed by the youth club leaders that each of the faith groups (residing in different parts of the city) had strong preconceptions about the areas in
which the others lived, and that they had carried out an exercise with maps of the city to discuss and overcome some of these ideas. After the first few interviews it became apparent that the children were not familiar with the names of other areas within the city, with many questioning “what’s that?” when asked to describe a particular neighbourhood. Though video data revealed that all participants were enjoyed this activity initially, they were disappointed when they did not know how to answer the question. In order to overcome this problem the researcher acting as Big Brother ascertained which envelopes contained general questions which they felt all children would be able to answer. However, it took several interviews in order to rectify this problem. This highlights the problem of being reliant on adult gatekeepers (Woodcok et al., 2009) who provided the information on which these questions were based.

The researcher acting as Big Brother did not know who was going to be interviewed. The researcher had no preconceived ideas of who the interviewee would be (having not seen the children entering the youth centre). As the child entered the room to begin the interview Big Brother did not know his/her name, gender, age or religion. This was asked during the interview in order to target some of the questions appropriately. However, Big Brother was still unaware of the appearance of the child.

During the interviews I could not see the children I was interviewing. Once the children told me their name and age I created a picture in my mind of how they looked. However, I became increasingly aware how difficult it was to conduct an interview without being able to make eye contact or use body language to read the situation. I had to use quite simplistic language whilst being expressive and articulate because I could not use gestures and eye contact to help me explain questions or
build a rapport with the child. I found this particularly difficult when respondents were talking about sensitive or upsetting matters. One female respondent described how she did not have many friends and often felt left out at the youth project. I found this had a strong effect on my emotions which was emphasised by me not being able to see her or reassure her through body language and eye contact.

McDowell (1992: 405) argues that feminist methodologies see the researcher becoming involved with the researched and that their mutual emotions and experiences may connect them. Whereas Phoenix (1994) and Mullings (1999) describe the way in which biographical moments within the research process create connections. Therefore, according to Jackson (2011: 49) “the researcher becomes part of the research; they are not only immersed within the research but their own emotions, connection and experiences become an active part of the research”. This enables the researcher to become closer to the narrative of the research, with the data that is gathered becoming more entangled with daily life. In the case of the Big Brother interviews the emotions of the researcher were enhanced by the unseen nature of the interview.

The Big Brother method had some interesting implications for power relations during the interviews. On the one hand, I felt in a position of power as I was the one asking the questions and the children certainly had a sense that Big Brother was in charge. On the other hand, I felt as though I actually had no power. The pressure of having one chance to conduct the interviews made me feel that the children and the gatekeepers were in a position of power as it had been so difficult to set up the interviews. Also, because I could not see the children I was interviewing I felt that they had more power than me. I was concerned that some of the children might peep
behind the screen to catch a glimpse of Big Brother, therefore ruining the method. Whilst this did not happen, I was aware and worried through all of the interviews that this might occur. In a way this rendered me powerless.

The issue of power is critical when conducting research with children and young people. Children may be particularly intimidated by adults when conducting interviews. Many authors have drawn attention to the need for researchers “to make more effort to find other [more innovative] ways in which children can communicate their experiences” (Valentine 1999: 149). Skelton (2008) suggests that age becomes the key marker of difference in research with young people. In this sense, the power lies with the researcher. The Big Brother method goes some way to reduce the power imbalance between child and researcher. Indeed the children seemed to recognise Big Brother as an authority figure. And yet, the fact that neither the researcher nor participant could see each other to some extent equalised the power differential.

After the interviews had been conducted I, along with the rest of the team, watched the videos of the interviews in order to reflect on the methodology and analyse the data collected. This was the first time that I had seen any of the respondents. On watching the interviews I realised that some of the children looked much older than they were in the picture that I had created of them in my mind. I also became aware that I had used a similar tone of voice for all of the interviews. If I had been conducting the interviews face-to-face I would have modified by tone of voice according to the appearance and age of the child. For some of the older children my tone of voice appeared as though it was aimed at someone of a younger age. This may have seemed patronizing or gained more limited results as I was using a more
simplistic tone. I was also aware of what I missed during the interviews by not being able to see any body language. When questions were asked where children were struggling they would often start looking at the ceiling or fidgeting. If I could have seen these non-verbal indicators I would have been able to adapt the questions or help them, but I was often unaware that they may have found some questions difficult to answer.

These are legitimate concerns, Fargas-Malet et al. (2010) suggests that it is very important when interviewing children for the researcher to use non-verbal behaviours. Since this could not be used in the Big Brother method (in this instance) it is important to consider what limitation this may have had on the data collection process. Since this pilot of the Big Brother method was part of a multi-method case study, the data collection as a whole can be considered rather than solely the results of the Big Brother interviews, which goes some way to mitigating this limitation. However, such a limitation could be overcome with the use of more sophisticated technological equipment. A screen showing the participant to Big Brother, for example, would have overcome such issues.

When the group of children were asked who would like to take part in an interview with Big Brother they were all very enthusiastic with their hands being raised in eagerness to participate. Should we have asked them if they would like to take part in a standard interview it is unlikely that they would have shown such enthusiasm. Indeed, many researchers have emphasised the need for using novel techniques when interviewing, or using multi-method techniques to reflect the diversity of children’s experiences and competencies by age, background, and ability (see Mauthner 1997; Punch 2002a; Punch 2002b; Barker and Weller 2003a; Darbyshire et al. 2005).
During the interviews the children all seemed excited to talk to Big Brother. They recounted stories and spoke to me like a friend. There was a rapport between us with some of them assuming I knew their friendship groups. One of them asked: “You know my friend Jack don’t you?” Perhaps because I was unseen to them, they felt as though they could open up to me and tell me about their experiences of being unhappy, or their opinions of other religions. There was a sense that what was said in the diary room would remain in the diary room. At the end of the interviews the children thanked me enthusiastically and shouted goodbye as though they were parting from a friend.

Outside the diary room the excitement of those who had been interviewed by Big Brother contributed to a mood of mystery and intrigue. Aware that Big Brother was female, one child who had been interviewed commented: “It’s not Big Brother. It’s Big Sister!” Another asked, “Who is Big Brother?” The chatter and excitement around Big Brother was further articulated when children came out of the diary room. Unable to answer questions of who Big Brother ‘was’ (they still had not seen the television programme ‘Big Brother’) further participants signed up, assuming that someone, at some point, would see Big Brother. To maintain the mystery Big Brother did not emerge from the diary room for the duration of the activity thereby leaving some level of excitement with those that had participated.

According to Cree et al. (2002) a key ethical consideration when conducting research with children is whether the children enjoyed taking part. The answer to that in the case of the Big Brother method is certainly affirmative. The method was successful in terms of creating a sense of enthusiasm to take part and creating a situation in which children were happy to talk about their views and experiences. This is perhaps due to the sense of confidentiality
leading to a feeling of security, to the fun and novel nature of the experience. However, the success of the approach lies, we feel, in being combined with the results of the other parts of the multi-method research design.

**Concluding thoughts**

In this paper we have discussed the challenges of conducting research with children. We have replied to the need to develop new child-centred research techniques which move beyond the existing power relations among children and adults by anchoring our approach in the idea of mystery. Here, by introducing a mixed-method design which includes one new technique – the Big Brother diary room – we were able to capture the unpredictable nature of the fieldwork, reflect on the ‘messiness’ of the research process and embrace spatial context of the research.

We decided to conduct a one-off, extensive research activity in a space ‘in-between’ the private, home space and the more institutionalised, school space, to use the potential of a ‘children-led’ zone. By entering the ‘messy’ space of the youth club, where children were engaged in ‘normal’ activities and socialisation, we recognised what were the limitations of interviewing and researching children in this research site. Children could be distracted by many other activities or could perceive us as other patronising ‘adults’. Instead of structuring and governing the space we decided to fully embrace these qualities – children were the autonomy to decide whether, how, and when to take part in the research.

Participants were very enthusiastic about the possibility of meeting and discovering Big Brother. This novel method proved that by breaking down the ‘traditional’ research participant power dynamic, we have been able to collect reflexive and rich research
material. And yet this was not done by fully empowering and informing participants. Interview recordings from the diary room demonstrated that young participants were not ‘stripped’ of their power and agency, but felt more confident talking about difference in a secret room to an important figure, represented by Big Brother. Meanwhile, the researcher that ‘played’ Big Brother, became less certain of her advantages as an adult researcher, since she could not observe and analyse non-verbal codes. Darbyshire et al. (2005: 418) call for a greater willingness to report the often messy and unpredictable nature of qualitative research, especially with children. In this paper we have provided a detailed account of the unpredictability of the research and reflected how we have overcome some of the emerging issues in the field. What has been revealed is that not all power imbalances are ‘bad’, not all are obvious, and that in using innovative methods we are able to, and indeed should, explore the potentiality of subverting now established assumptions underlying research design.

As such, this paper contributes to the qualitative research methods applied both in research with children and adults. We believe that the Big Brother diary room, as a novel creative research technique, could be more widely used by qualitative researchers, especially to challenge existing power relation in a given space. This method can generate rich data on sensitive topics, such as exclusion on prejudice, and elicit information which in a standard in-depth interview is difficult to obtain.
References


