Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

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Roles of a Researcher:
Reflections after Doing a Case-Study with Youth on a Sensitive Topic

Maria Murumaa-Mengel and Andra Siibak

1. Introduction

It has been argued that present day young people may feel the effects of a world with a greater diversity of risks and opportunities than ever before and more than any other social groups (Miles, 2003). Young social networking site (SNS) users, for example, seem to be attracting the most academic and popular attention, because they are often at the forefront of emerging social practices (Robards, 2013). This attention is often full of normative worry because there is evidence to suggest that young people are adopting more childlike patterns of behaviour due to dissatisfaction with adult values and as a means of escape from the risks associated with that adult world (Chatterton/Hollands, 2001). In addition, what adults regard as risks (e.g. meeting strangers online), the young may see as opportunities (e.g. making new friends) (Kalmus/Ólafsson, 2013) and in our opinion, this inconsistency deserved some qualitative academic research interest.

Our previous research on teenagers' perceptions about the imagined audience on Facebook (Murumaa/Siibak, 2012) showed that Estonian high–school students perceived one of the most dangerous user types on Facebook to be a foreign pervert. Wanting to research that finding a bit further we set out to study this perception of a specific and harmful Internet user, the online pervert, more closely with the aim to study how these perceptions have formed. Rather than making use of more traditional approaches for gathering the data (e.g. interviews, focus-groups), we decided to use creative research methods approach (Gauntlett, 2007) and combine drawing a picture of an internet pervert with an in-depth interview. We decided to make use of creative research methods because we believed such an approach might have a potential to offer alternative ways of expression for the young when talking about a sensitive topic. We also

relied on the claims by Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994: 160) who have argued that drawing a picture first and giving an oral description and reflection about it afterwards serves as a translation and carries a "metacognitive function".

In the context of the present chapter, however, we do not focus upon the utterances and drawings made by the participants of this study, but rather dwell upon the different roles the researcher had to take during the course of the study. We consider the topic to be important because researchers are not blank minds, but always carry their own previous experiences, perceptions, ideas and roles into the research process. In fact, as claimed by Labaree (2002), significant volume of literature is devoted to the dichotomy of insider–outsider-ness of researchers in many different fields in qualitative research. In the present chapter we will mainly concentrate on the idea that every researcher is multiple insider and outsider at any moment (Deutsch, 1981).

2. Doing qualitative research with young people

It has been suggested (Lansdown, 1994) that we do not have a culture of listening to children, although they are vulnerable because of their physical weakness, and their lack of knowledge and experience. The practice of listening to the young, for example through qualitative research on children and teens, has become more common in the recent years (e.g. Kalmus/Ólafsson, 2013; Ponte et al., 2013; Oolo/Siibak, 2013; Görzig/Frumkin, 2013; Kernaghan/Elwood, 2013; Lwin et al., 2011; Livingstone et al., 2011) but the presumption of children's biological and psychological vulnerability (Lansdown, 1994) is still evident and sometimes inhibiting their opportunity to speak for themselves. Some more novel approaches, though, aim to generate a more collaborative mode (Pink, 2003; Toon, 2008) to the whole research procedure. For instance, creative research methods offer research participants greater editorial control (Holliday, 2004) over the material as they can erase or modify their artefacts and thereby portray the aspects important to them. Nevertheless, even while making use of creative research method, Gauntlett (2007) has warned the researchers not to impose their own readings on the artefacts created by the participants but rather give "voice" to the makers to interpret and comment their work. Furthermore, during those interviews with the young a variety of generic techniques e.g. friendly conversational tone, sympathetic responses, and offering sets of alternatives, need to be used so as the interview to be a success (Hodkinson, 2005).

Researching the young becomes particularly challenging when the research focuses on a "sensitive" topic. Despite different definitions of what is a "sensitive topic", the majority of the authors agree on the fact that "sensitivity is perceived in the eye of the beholder" (Zanjani/Rowles, 2012: 400) mainly

due to the fact that sensitivity as such is socially constructed and dependent on the norms and taboos of a given culture (cf. Noland, 2012). In other words, it is possible that any topic can be sensitive, although some topics have a greater potential to harm the participants involved in the study, i.e. elicit such emotions as anger, embarrassment, anxiety, fear and sadness (Cowles, 1988); as well as cause distress on the researcher (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007).

In general it is believed that sensitive topics of research are those that participants may feel uncomfortable to discuss (Noland, 2012). For instance, in addition to topics associated with sex and sexuality and health issues which are usually considered to be taboo topics, also "topics associated with shame or guilt, and topics that generally reside in the private spheres of our lives" (Noland, 2012: 3) are commonly viewed as sensitive. Therefore, the question of involvement with the participants, or insider-outsider-ness is always an important aspect, when researching sensitive topics among the young.

3.   Present case-study "Who is an online pervert?"

Our case-study "Who is an online pervert?"[1], carried out in spring 2012, set out to analyse some specific perceptions of an online pervert among Estonian high school students, so as to develop more thorough insight into young people's thoughts and experiences on the topic, and to determine some foundations of these perceptions.

The study is based on a convenience sample, as the students were recruited by the main author of the article who was also the students' media studies teacher in the high-school they attended. Participation in the study was voluntary, but all the participating students received one additional grade in media studies for taking part. The final sample consisted of five boys and five girls aged 17-20 years. Such an age group was selected mainly because they have grown up with the Internet and were believed to have valuable insight to speak about such a sensitive topic. As all of the participants were in their late teens we also believed that they had had time to develop a stance about the things they have encountered online and might thus be in a more comfortable position to comment on those things when looking back on the younger self.

The study procedure was built upon two phases. First the students were asked to draw a picture of an internet pervert. The young were provided with A4-sized blank papers and a variety of pencils and (felt-tip) pens, however, no further instructions were given about the task. When some of the participants asked questions in order to clarify the task (e.g. "what do you mean by pervert?", "should it be one person or can I draw several people?"), the moderator avoided giving restrictive answers and encouraged them to interpret the exercise any way they felt to be right and express themselves freely.

Two months after the creative exercise, during the second phase of the study, follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants. Interviews lasted from 36 minutes to 65 minutes, depending on the participants' communicative activity. In the first part of the interview, the young were asked more general questions about their Internet usage practices and things they like and dislike about the Internet. These opening questions were followed by more general questions about internet crimes. In the third phase of the interview, pictures of online perverts drawn by the interviewees were presented and the young were asked to comment and reflect upon the sketches they had made. The interviews ended again with a broader approach, when the interviewer asked the students about their thoughts about the possibility of rehabilitation and just punishment of criminals and prevention of such online crimes.

4.   Reflections about the role of a researcher

When conducting a qualitative study, and especially when a study is on a sensitive topic, extra attention must be given to the role of a moderator or interviewer, keeping in mind that during any research situation people will take up a variety of behaviours all of which lead to the take up of various roles. In our case-study, both the researcher and the participants were taking on a number of different roles as the interviews advanced. This chapter will focus on two of these roles: the "researcher-friend(ly adult)" and the "researcher-confidant" role.

4.1   Researcher-friend(ly adult)

Preexisting relationships and the possibility to refer to shared experiences (the interviewer and moderator of the drawing exercise has been students' media studies teacher during previous three years) seemed to make the relationship between researcher and the researched more equal and "cultivate degrees of intimacy" (Taylor, 2011: 10). Although some scholars argue that given the disparities of power that usually divides researchers and participants and speaking about friendship in this context "is somewhat odd" (Crick, 1992: 176), we found ourselves taking the "leap across the personal/professional divide" (Taylor, 2011: 13) and having the role of if not as a friend, then at least as a "friendly adult" (Davis, 1998: 329).

According to Mercer (2006: 7) "people's willingness to talk to you, and what people say to you is influenced by who they think you are". In the context of our case-study the interviewees clearly considered the interviewer to be more like a friend or a friendly adult than their teacher. This role was partly also due to the fact that the researcher was closer to the students' age than the

Estonian teachers in general are. The latter fact, we believe was also the reason why the students were willing to share their honest opinion on topics that they might not have revealed if the researcher were older.

> M1: when an older teacher talks [about internet safety], then it's maybe like „what are you nagging about here, old hag", that kind of attitude.

Despite the fact that the teacher was roughly 10 years older than the students, some of the interviewees also included the interviewer in their construction of „us":

> M5: like, people our age have online flirting and stuff, right?

When taking up a role of a researcher-friend(ly adult) interviewer self-disclosure is crucial. In fact, several authors (Abell et al., 2006; Eder/Fingerson, 2003) have suggested that while conducting research with young people interviewer self-disclosure might help to empower the participants and encourage them to share their ideas and experiences. In the context of an interview "interviewer self-disclosure takes place when the interviewer shares ideas, attitudes and/or experiences concerning matters that might relate to the interview topic in order to encourage respondents to be more forthcoming" (Reinharz/Chase, 2003: 79). Examples where interviewer self-disclosure encouraged the interviewees to ponder even further about some specific themes was also visible in case of our interviews.

> M1: I don't know...
> Moderator: ...I'm trying to think as well, what else is there that gets on my nerves...hmmm...
> M1: mmm, and comments too.

Especially when conducting research on a sensitive topic, the participants may not always know how to put their thoughts into words; may not have had a previous experience of talking on the subject; feel a bit uncomfortable and uneasy to express themselves or even think about the theme; or just may lack the right vocabulary. Our experience shows that one of the ways how to overcome these difficulties with minimum discomfort is for the researcher to offer scenarios. For instance, in our case, when the interviewees were visibly struggling to express themselves, the interviewer chose between different scenarios to help them – either by widening or narrowing the focus; offering some possibilities, or even by giving personal examples. While care must be taken to avoid leading respondents towards particular answers through such contributions, the ability sometimes to move interviews towards a situation of two-way exchange rather than the usual question-and-answer format can offer substantial advantages in terms of trust and conversational flow (Hodkinson, 2005).

As mentioned above, our participants seemed eager to take part of the study and expressed continuing interest in the subject even after the interviews took place. For example, some of them wanted to continue the discussions on the topic with the researcher through Facebook.

4.2 Researcher-confidant

The participants in our study often chose the passive voice to describe the essence of the online-threats. However, when the moderator brought the subject closer by rephrasing (e.g. "let's say you would encounter such a person online, what would you do?"; "if you would have a 12 year old daughter, would you allow them to talk to a 50 year old?"), on many occasions the young started telling stories from personal experience. On such occasions it was clear that the interviewer had opened a "Pandora's box" (Ramos, 1989) - it seemed that asking the question more personally evoked different memories and the need to tell these stories.

The latter practice however, leads to one of the most crucial and difficult questions a researcher needs to face while conducting research on sensitive topics - how to protect the participants and handle their personal experiences with extra care and sensitivity. It seems that many young participants of this study did not have anyone (grown up) to talk to on such delicate matters as online threats and paedophiles. Some of the participants were hence clearly exited by a chance to have a discussion on the topic with an adult interested in their thoughts and experiences while others seemed to be looking for support or reaffirmation on their beliefs and actions.

> Moderator: but it is rather sad what you have described here, violent history and loneliness...
> F2: yes, actually it is

Like Eglinton in her ethnographical study (2013), we found that many participants saw the study as a chance to talk to someone about a subject that may have been off limits to speak about with the other adults in their lives. Surprisingly, several participants told stories about how they had been involved in internet crime, most often cases of identity theft (fake accounts or logging on to someone else's account). In our opinion, these examples also illustrate that the interviews had a "tin-opener effect" (Etherington, 1996), i.e. the students felt so comfortable with the interviewer that the interview was at times turned into a confessional situation. Such confessionals, however, are considered to be difficult but rewarding processes for the study participants (Lupton, 1998) as they might feel empowered by the opportunity to share their stories. Hence, similar to Berger (2001) and Swartz (2011), we found that by sharing own per-

sonal stories, participants seemed to feel more comfortable while exchanging information and thereby the hierarchical gap between researcher and respondent was narrowed even more, if not closed entirely.

Sometimes the participants also started to use the interview as a chance to gossip about people known to both the interviewer and the interviewee. Participants told stories about friends with crazy girlfriends, homophobic relatives, „stupid" teachers and unfair mothers. Sometimes the stories were tightly connected to our topics, sometimes they just used the interviewer as a pair of „thankful ears". In order to protect the participants (and their friends and family), the interviewer had to intervene a couple of times and stop the interviewees' from saying things in the heat of the moment they could possibly regret later. This was done in some of the gossiping cases (e.g. a girl talking about a classmate) but also to save the participants from having to say out vulgarities or sexually explicit things:

> M5: A real pervert is a person who sits at a computer or lurks around pre-schools to seek out victims /---/ and when they start saying things like ‚are your breasts growing yet?' or ‚do you like pee-pees?'
> Moderator: Yes, yes, it turns into that kind of...

Another aspect a researcher-confidant has to think through in case of sensitive topics is the question how to react when a participant describes something truly harmful and laughs about it. This happened a few times and in the present case the interviewer decided to solve this situation by asking specifying describing questions in a neutral manner (face expression, tone of voice), like „I see you are laughing, why is that?". In situations like these one can see the researcher's sub-roles - a „moral compass" - emerging.

> M2: it is very nice to look at little girls' picture online
> Moderator: yeah, „nice"[hand quotation marks in air], right?
> M2: exactly, „nice"[hand quotation marks in air]

Another aspect that the researcher has to be aware of while conducting research with young people on sensitive topics is the fact that such studies and discussions really do affect the participants. Our experience shows that having a chance to discuss such issues with an adult encouraged the young to think about the topic, gave them some extra tools for interpreting the world, and a sharper eye for noticing things discussed.

> Moderator: Have you noticed anything like that?
> M1: I haven't been able to see it like that until now.

Furthermore, it was apparent that this research experience had made a long lasting effect on the young. For instance, M1 visited the interviewing teacher a year later and reminded her of the topic of online-perverts, referring also to the interview („remember, like we talked once about the pervs"). In rather idealistic words this experience suggests, that – a researcher can and will have an impact on the people that they encounter whilst conducting studies. This responsibility, however, should not be taken lightly. For example, as acknowledged by Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputtong (2007) researchers conducting research on sensitive topics should have the contact details for professional who could offer their advice and counselling to the participant if there would raise a need for that.

5.   Conclusion

General ethical guidelines to any research stress the importance of respect for persons and we see it as our main commitment to represent participants fairly, as much as it is possible in an interactionalist view. This means, that we try to give voice to the young without harming them; we do not wish to fuel any moral panics about youth; try to overcome our own adultist agenda (Miles, 2003); and stay true to the internal integrity of the study. To do that, the researcher has to be flexible and move between roles to their best understanding. In this paper we have discussed only two roles, but in reality, hundreds of other roles can be seen when reflecting about one's study experience.

Hence, we argue that while doing research and having certain knowledge and considerable background on the topic, we might be "blinkered from the mundane realities of youth" (Miles, 2003: 177), so in order to "make sense of the lives of youth, the risks and dangers they face, and the personal, social, and cultural logic behind their practices" (Boyd/Marwick, 2009: 410), we should sometimes set aside the rigid academic roles and explore the subject with wider range of roles available.

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