

## Research Space

Journal article

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**The Importance of an Organic Process in Ethnographic Research:  
Working with Children in a Physical Activity Setting**

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## **The Importance of an Organic Process in Ethnographic Research: Working with Children in a Physical Activity Setting**

*Background:* In comparison to adult-centred research in physical activity, there are far fewer studies which concentrate on hearing children's voices in physical activity research (Noonan et al. 2016). Additionally, despite a number of studies which utilise a child-centred approach, the number of papers which concentrate on the complexities when conducting research with young people are extremely limited.

*Purpose:* To consider power relationships between adult researchers and young participants. Also, to provide empirical examples of considerations related to an organic research process and the complexities that may arise in research with children.

*Data Collection and Analysis:* An ethnographic approach is deemed useful when conducting research with children (Davis and Watson 2017), but particular considerations need to be taken into account as an adult conducting research with young people. The data for this paper was drawn from a year-long ethnographic study with junior korfbal players (aged 11-13 years of age). The study involved participant observation where the researcher's role was 'coaches' help'. Nine semi-structured interviews took place 10-months into the study, and numerous informal conversations occurred throughout the research. Some of Foucault's ideas related power were utilised to discuss the way relationships were negotiated with children to maintain a child-centred approach to the research.

*Final Thoughts:* Adopting an organic approach to research may help reduce young participants' perceptions of adult power. Adopting a Foucauldian lens can also heighten awareness of power divisions and aid the researcher's sensitivity to their own use of techniques of power whilst in the field. Additionally, an organic approach can also help facilitate child-centred research which empowers participants and supports their voices being heard.

Keywords: child-centred research, physical activity, children, ethnography, Foucault

## **Introduction**

As stated by Noonan et al. (2016, 3) there is ‘a dearth of literature featuring the children’s voice’ in qualitative research which investigates children’s physical activity, with research tending to rely on parental insight. Unsurprisingly then, there are limited examples of research which deliberate the complexities when conducting research with children in physical activity settings. This paper intends to contribute to this area by using empirical examples to discuss considerations made during research with junior korfbal players.

Physical activity and physical education (PE) research which recognises the need to hear young people’s voices has differed in approach, but several studies draw on the importance of young participants having control over the process. For example, Quarmby (2014) utilised participatory methods to understand the physical activity experiences of looked-after children. He took a flexible approach to the research and children were given choices about how they participated so that they had control. Amongst other methods, the boys within the study chose to use timelines to track their physical activity engagement as they often used this method for other means within the care home, so it was a familiar activity in the setting. They also engaged in peer interviewing to alleviate the power relationship between an adult researcher and the youth interviewee. Additionally, Noonan et al. (2016) conducted a study with primary school children aged 10-11 years, about out of school physical activity. They adopted Write, Draw, Show and Tell (WDST). Ensuring children’s voices were heard was important in this study too, so the guide for the WDST was created from previously conducted focus groups with children, so was informed by ideas important to children. The WDST task was also followed by informal conversations with groups of children, which created additional opportunities for children to freely express themselves. To

increase participant ownership of research, Oliver (2001) took measures to ensure adolescent girls were co-creators of research. This gave them opportunities to consider what was important in relation to their bodies and, therefore, what might need to be considered in physical education. After girls used images from magazines and photographs which they had taken to consider issues in relation to their own bodies and girls' bodies more generally, the researcher and participants co-created inquiry projects which included designing and analysing surveys to gain the perceptions of girls that were not part of the initial stage of the study.

In addition to the co-creation of the research through young people choosing data collection methods (Quarmby 2014), generating topic areas for further investigation (Noonan et al. 2016), and designing and analysing research to be conducted with peers (Oliver 2001), these studies drew heavily on visual artefacts for data collection or to prompt discussion. As stated, Oliver (2001) utilised several visual approaches related to photographs and magazine images. Quarmby (2014) also used visual approaches including timelines where participants acknowledged key physical activity moments with words and drawings on the timelines. Quarmby (2014) described how visual artefacts elicited conversations which were instigated by participants and were also the foundation for peer interviewing. Noonan et al. (2016) also embraced visual methods through WDST. Children wrote five words on sticky notes that described physical activity (write), drew a space that physical activity happens (draw), then they stuck the sticky notes on a board (show) and discussed the ideas they had represented (tell). The number of different ways the children could engage with the task was seen to be an opportunity for children to express themselves meaningfully. Despite these studies recognising the importance of approaches which use visual artefacts, Quarmby (2014) also acknowledges the advantages of using methods that young people

are familiar with, or techniques which are usual within the setting. This was an important consideration in this study as children were not in home or school environments. Instead, participants in this study had chosen to attend a sports club and spend their time engaging in physical activity.

Although several studies have discussed the child-centred research approach they took when conducting physical activity research with children, few studies have acknowledged complex moments encountered when working with children. McEvoy, Enright and MacPhail (2017) do this as they reflect on ethical considerations related to their research. They conducted focus groups with 15-19- year-olds in educational settings to investigate physical activity experiences. Their paper gives rich insight into the ethical considerations related to several data collection moments. These moments included when participants made racist remarks, and when peer dynamics indicated one participant had become marginalised and was being teased by others. The researcher reflected on the difficult decisions she had to make in relation to respecting participant autonomy, but also feeling her own a duty of care and social responsibility. McEvoy, Enright and MacPhail (2017) also reflect on moments during the focus groups where the researcher may not have clearly respected the participants' rights to not engage in the process. For example, the researcher told one participant that they could continue to stand by the window if they answered questions. These moments were realised once transcription of focus groups had occurred. The researchers reflected on how there was negotiation about the participant continuing to participate and that this might be problematic with regards to informed content.

Although Fitzgerald, Jobling and Kirk (2003) do not reflect on ethical dilemmas in their research, they discuss data collection dilemmas which occurred during their participatory research related to PE and sport experiences with young disabled people.

Like Oliver (2001) they focussed their efforts on completing a study that considered participants as ‘student co-researchers’ to ensure that the participants’ voices were heard. Although the researchers identified the broad theme related to young disabled people’s experiences of PE and sport, the co-researchers designed the research process in a similar way to the participants in Quarmby’s (2014) study, and they also collected the data. Despite the eventual success of the research process, Fitzgerald, Jobling and Kirk (2003) explain that co-researchers were slow to engage in the planning the research process. Researchers suggested that this may be because sessions deviated from the students’ normal routine and were not like other school classes. Additionally, there was a lack of familiarity between co-researchers and the researcher. Fortunately, extended time with participants alleviated this and research became more fruitful. They also reflected on the process whereby student co-researchers had instigated the use of cameras to gather data, but, upon reflection of the process, the researcher realised that several co-researchers could not use the cameras without help. This process disempowered those students, despite the research mostly promoting empowerment. This demonstrated how the child-centred approach and design meant that moments occurred that the researcher had not anticipated.

In a comparable way to Fitzgerald, Jobling and Kirk’s (2003) study, students were co-researchers in Enright and O’Sullivan’s (2012) Participatory Action Research (PAR) with 15-18-year-old students who were disengaged from physical activity. The researcher and PE teacher were adult allies who helped students think critically about their PE curriculum. Luguetti, Kirk and Oliver (2019) also conducted similar research which aimed to empower youths from socially vulnerable backgrounds to think critically about their lives. Within Enright and O’Sullivan (2012) study, students took photographs that related to prompts given by the researchers and then talked about the

photographs with the adult allies and the group of students. Azzarito and Hill (2013) also used this approach when encouraging young females to document spaces relevant to their physicality. Discussions in Enright and O'Sullivan's (2012) research either related to photograph and timeline artefacts or were led by the students and their questions. The researchers noted some interesting conversations with the participants which demonstrated some complexities in the research. For example, they recognised that diary entries sometimes suggested that students did more physical activity than they actually did. The photographic artefacts helped reveal less participation due to a lack of photographs taken. Upon discussion, students suggested they had exaggerated their activities as they assumed that was what the researcher wanted to see, but they were less likely to lie when discussing photograph and timeline artefacts. Additionally, the researchers cited the importance of spending extended time with students to gain their trust so that they felt they could be more honest. The importance of extended time with participants was also noted by Fitzgerald, Jobling and Kirk (2003) and was a key consideration in the research in this paper.

These examples of child-centred research demonstrate the considerations made by adult researchers working with young people as well as the complexities researchers have encountered. These papers acknowledge valuable data collection methods but as Quarmby (2014) suggested in his research, it is sometimes useful to employ approaches which are normal in the research setting to encourage participant engagement. Fitzgerald, Jobling and Kirk (2003) also saw implementation of unusual methods in their setting to be a potential reason that young people were initially reluctant to engage with the research process. Therefore, it is useful to evaluate the appropriateness of chosen participatory methods when conducting research with children. Within this study, utilising certain participatory methods would have altered attempts to leave the



research process to develop naturally without intervention in the sports club where the research was taking place. As suggested in due course, research process can evolve organically. In 2021, the Cambridge Dictionary defined ‘organic’ as ‘happening or developing naturally over time, without being forced or planned by anyone’. In relation to this research, this term has been applied to refer to a research process that, although planned at an early stage, developed in response to the changing research environment and the participants involved. This organic approach to research was reactive and adjusted depending on moments with participants.

### ***Child-Centred Ethnography***

Few physical activity studies rely on a child-centred ethnographic approach with children. A child-centred research approach is one which recognises children as social actors with agency (Mayeza 2017). Mayeza (2017, 1) uses the work of Thorne (1993) to explain the importance of ‘a critical child-centred ethnographic approach that seeks to reduce the common-sense, adult-centred adult–child power relationship in order to address childhood agency in research with children’. He recognises the need for children to be respected as the experts on their lives, and for adult researchers to assume the position of less authoritative figures. In his research, he developed strategies to adopt a friendlier role with the children in his research related to enactments of gender in a South African primary school. To maintain a child-centred relationship, Mayeza (2017) played with the participants in the playground at break time, something which teachers did not do. He also conducted informal conversations during this time and in the space where they had the most freedom to decide whether to participate. Fitzpatrick (2011, 2013) discusses similar considerations in her critical ethnography at a multi-ethnic High School. She discusses the importance of building relationships and trust with the young people who she conducted the research with. She was included in teams

and discussions within Health and Physical Education lessons (but not as an authority on the subject) and involved herself in activities unrelated to classes such as joking around and discussing school events and weekend activities. This helped to alleviate age, cultural and educational differences between the ethnographer and participants. Additionally, Fitzpatrick (2011) mirrored the casual dress of young people and distanced herself from adults by spending time with students during breaktimes and refusing school keys. Nevertheless, complexities arose as she still talked to teacher friends and used the staffroom on rainy days. Students also asked for advice in relation to assignments which demonstrated the participants' understanding of her being different to them. One participant even called her 'Miss' despite her always using her first name (see also McEvoy, Enright and MacPhail 2017). This was also evident in Fitzgerald, Jobling and Kirk's (2003) research where students seemed to recognise the adult researcher as a quasi-teacher as they sometimes asked for permission to do certain things.

The research in this paper takes a similar approach to Mayeza (2017) and Fitzpatrick (2011). It uses an ethnographic study with children in a physical activity setting to unpack key considerations related to research process. Excerpts from fieldwork will be used to illustrate data collection considerations during a child-centred ethnography. Additionally, some of Foucault's discussions of power are used to explain the socially constructed relationships between the adult researcher and child participants. This paper provides empirical examples of considerations related to an organic research process and the complexities that may arise in research with children. It demonstrates how Foucauldian theories of power can heighten a critical lens when conducting child-centred research.

### ***Foucault and Power Relationships***

I primarily engaged with Foucault's work to analyse data in the research, but this engagement heightened my critical understanding of power relationships and 'the other'. This critical lens had an ongoing influence during the ethnographic process. Foucault's discussion of disciplinary techniques such as normalising judgement; classification of individuals to separate the 'normal' from the 'abnormal'; as well as ideas related to panopticism will be applied to the research process in this paper. The way that power functions, the workings of discourse and practices that may alter it, and the importance of surveillance were all important when working with children during this research. I critically considered how the characteristics of power applied to the research setting and how these may influence me as the researcher and the children that research was being conducted with. This helped me reflexively consider actions and interactions with participants. I attempted to challenge broader discourses about adults and children and empower the children in our conversations and interactions.

Foucault (1990) suggested that power is omnipresent; entrenched in the whole society and within social structures (Foucault 1982), but power relations are specific in each location and are always subject to change (Foucault 1984; Foucault 1990). Ultimately, no one person is in possession of power, it is not owned by individuals (Foucault 1979). Traditionally, adults have assumed power over children through various techniques and within various institutions such as schools (Foucault 1979), meaning that there tends to be a socially constructed assumption that adults are figures of authority. Yet, the fluid nature of power means that there is always a chance for child participants to embrace power in the relationship with an adult researcher. It informed the idea that, over a prolonged time, traditional power relationships could be challenged. Essentially, a relationship of power 'is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their action' (Foucault 1982, 340). As

discussions will demonstrate, I reflexively considered my actions over the time spent completing this ethnography to support actions from children which were less driven by their perceptions of how they thought they should act around an adult. Every society has a particular system of truth, a 'general politics' of truth which is based upon accepted discourses (Foucault 1976). This truth informs understandings related to the dominance of adults over children.

Normalising judgement is a technique of power (Foucault 1979). Foucault (1990) recognised how normalisation can occur by granting discretion to normal actions, whilst judging transgression (Foucault 1988). Foucault (1979) explained how normalising judgement works in systems such as schools to facilitate power relations between adults and children. He discussed how failure to act appropriately can end in humiliation, deprivation, or physical discipline. Therefore, normalising judgement provides a process whereby children are judged if they do not comply with acceptable norms.

Normalising judgement is often seen as a result of 'othering' (Foucault 1982). Foucault discussed the way in which 'the gaze' acts as a comparative practice of classification (Foucault 1994). The scientific classification of people has been used as a tool to mark people and recognise difference, and dividing practices then act to separate the normal from the abnormal, the ones in power from those with less power in each situation (Foucault 1982). The concept of 'the other', in comparison to what is considered as 'normal', was discussed frequently within Foucault's work, and formed a discrete part of the classification process (e.g., Foucault 1988). Foucault (1979) suggested that dividing practices are created through discourses to legitimate social and spatial divides between social groups. In this research, scientific classification marks the difference between adults and children. Discourses shape embodied differences and

age specific practices which emerge from discursive practices.

An atmosphere of classification and rules that exhibit what is right and wrong develops an environment of self-surveillance and regulation. Foucault (1979) described panopticism as the representation of power relations in everyday life. Panopticism suggests that individuals are visible beings, potentially subject to a constant social gaze. Foucault (1979) explained the gaze as both real and perceived, where punishments are exerted by some to normalise others, but also where individuals are aware of the potential gaze from others. Fear of the gaze generates self-surveillance and, therefore, individuals monitor their own behaviour for fear of judgement or punishment (Foucault 1979). Foucault (1994) argued that the gaze that knows and makes decisions, is the gaze that reigns. In the setting for this research, a sports club where adults coached and managed and children participated, adults seemingly made most of the decisions. This was a significant consideration as an adult researcher conducting child-centred ethnography. Within the research, it was important to consider ways that I could change the participants' understandings of subtle, everyday power, and reduce the participants' perception of my gaze.

## **Methods**

This research took place with a junior korfbal club in the South East of England. Korfbal is a mixed-gender sport where players can only mark players of their own gender and goals are scored by successfully shooting a ball into the basket. A 12-month ethnographic study was conducted with 11-13-year-old korfbal players that formed the under 13's team. As Wolcott (2005) suggests, ethnographies utilise relatively small sample numbers and are more concerned with the length of time the research takes place. Additionally, Davis and Watson (2017) argue that ethnographic studies related to children allow a more thorough and detailed story to appear. In this research, ethnography

helped to conduct research *with* children, rather than *upon them*, which has been a critique of previous investigations (Christensen and James 2017). Junior korfball players were included in the construction of knowledge through long-term involvement in the study.

Participant observation is central to ethnographic research (Madden 2017) and was useful when researching with children because it allowed me to develop relationships with participants and closely witness important moments in the field. As Sands (2002, 22) suggests, ‘the more time spent with the culture and the more participatory the fieldwork, the less intrusion is felt by the fieldworker and cultural members’. Basic notes were made on my phone during breaks in play as many of the players used phones during breaks too. I also recorded audio descriptions on my phone in the car before I left the korfball space. I then wrote up notes and transcribed audio recordings in more detail as soon as possible. In total, data was collected from 26 indoor training sessions, eight outdoor training sessions, six league matches which happened on sporadic Sundays during league time between October and May, six summer tournaments which took place occasionally over weekends during out of season months, one adult match which the junior team went to support, the Christmas social and a bowling social event.

Formal semi-structured interviews with five girls and four boys took place approximately 10 months into the study. On numerous occasions before training started or during breaks in play at tournaments, I asked if anyone wanted to come and answer some questions with me. Over time, five of the six girls and four of the six boys chose to do so. The 10-month timeframe was significant as I had the opportunity to build rapport with the players before interviews took place. Ethnographic interviews also arose organically from informal conversations in the field and were particularly

useful in generating information that was important to participants as they were initiated by children and focused on their conversations with each other.

### ***My Role***

When this research started, I was a 26-year-old female PhD student and a current korfball player. I had previous experience conducting an ethnography with adults in a different korfball club and experience conducting interviews with children in school settings. My position as an adult conducting research with children was something I was acutely aware of and which will be discussed later in this paper. I gained membership status in the junior korfball team relatively quickly due to my understanding of social structures, relationships, and ‘normal’ practices (Corsaro and Molinari 2017). Having been involved in korfball on and off for 13 years when this research started, I had a firm grasp of the rules and tactics of the game. I had also been a junior korfball player myself at the participants’ age. My knowledge of the game and culture meant that my transition into the junior korfball team did not feel difficult.

In addition to my knowledge of the korfball game and junior korfball culture, my entry to the team was also helped as I was introduced to the team by the Head Coach of the junior team (Zoe). I had met Zoe through an adult korfball player that we both knew. Zoe introduced me to the junior team as an experienced korfball player who would help the coach and support the team. The initial alignment with the Head Coach and coach of the under 13’s team, grouped me with figures of authority which emphasised my difference from the junior players. Within this research, as an adult, I had to find ways to avoid being classified as different to the children and separated from them (Foucault 1982) due to my typically adult role in the team. Within society, adults and children are marked as different, and power is usually shared unevenly. Junior players’ knowledge of my background assisted my integration into the team through

explicitly highlighting my usefulness to the group, and providing a certain amount of cultural capital, but I had to actively avoid letting myself be seen as a more powerful adult figure. Discrepancies in age between myself as the researcher and the child participants was a particularly important consideration when talking to children, since children tend to believe that they are less powerful than adults (Mayall 2008).

### ***Power Relationships***

As Sands (2002, 22) recognises, there are multiple difficulties in gaining rapport with a new community and learning how to behave in that community ‘until accepted as part of the social landscape’. In this ethnography, players became more used to my presence as I spent time engaging juniors and demonstrating that I was not a member of the formal coaching team. I wanted to blur dominant discourses which mark adults and children as different, and I needed to reinforce the notion that power is not static and owned by all adults in all social situations (Foucault 1979). I considered my actions and interactions in a hope that I could reduce perceived classification differences between myself as an adult and participants as children (Foucault 1982). For example, I took the role of coaches’ helper and during training I helped with practices set out by coaches. Playing alongside participants increased my closeness and their respect (Wellard 2009) based on my ability as a korfbal player. I also regularly provided support and positive encouragement, such as cheering from the side-lines at matches and telling them they played well after games, but left critical feedback to coaches. Additionally, I took opportunities to distinguish myself as different from the coaches, for example, I let players paint my face in team colours before a cup match as all the juniors had their faces painted.

To gain the acceptance of the junior players, I made more of an effort than other coaches to talk with children during ‘downtime’ and developed alternative relationships



with them which were less formal than coach relationships with players. I gained an understanding of key cultural influences in children's lives, for example, I learned that Hollister was a favoured brand of clothing; players enjoyed numerous sports and activities such as shopping and gymnastics (Lorraine), netball (Gemma), skateboarding (James); and Gemma loved the boyband 'One Direction'. I casually asked players about their weekends, they talked to me about school, they showed me photos on their mobile phones, and we took selfies on their phones and they applied filters. I showed interest in their lives outside of korfbal and I laughed with them. I had the role of a less powerful adult which became an important part of my status. I did not make decisions about training practices and I chose to not discipline the players. Therefore, I tried to avoid a contradictory position as an adult with disciplinary power in some instances and a confidant during interviews.

### ***Data Analysis***

To generate clear themes for discussion in this paper, I started by identifying notes from fieldwork that illustrated key moments of reflection during the research. These key moments were then grouped together, and three themes emerged: renouncing adult status, child-led conversations and sensitivity, and embracing organic research.

### **Findings and Discussion**

As an adult researcher, there were numerous times that I had to consider how I acted and interacted with the young people in this research. Importantly, I had to consider my reactions to events or moments during observation and conversations. Being reflexive about my values and influence as an adult researcher and embracing an organic approach to research aided the authenticity of the research and ensured participants remained as comfortable as possible.

### ***Renouncing Adult Status***

Researcher reflexivity is important when researching with children and adults alike since the researcher cannot be objectively removed from the research process, instead, the research process develops through interactions between the researcher and participants (Connolly 2017). During the ethnography, I often had to reflexively consider my adult perspectives and potential reactions to moments. For example, at the end of a training session, Lorraine was bent over near Sophie who was sat down. Sophie told her *'you nearly sat on my head!'*. Lorraine retorted to this comment by suggesting *'I could've farted in your mouth!'*. In response, Sophie walked off to get her water and bag. Lorraine continued this discussion with me and explained, *'that happened to me once, at a sleepover, someone farted in my mouth – it was horrible!'*. She laughed as she recalled this experience. In situations such as these, I avoided normalising judgement by laughing along with participants rather than giving looks of judgement or making comments that might be interpreted as a humiliation or punishment (Foucault 1979). By avoiding these reactions, I hoped that it would discourage heightened self-surveillance (Foucault 1979). Drawing on Foucault's (1979) assertion that power is dynamic and not owned by some, I tried to relinquish power as an adult and researcher.

Additionally, I tried to adopt a position of personal awareness and made efforts to consider my field notes, analysis and interpretation as an adult representing the voice of children. Within this research, there were times that I needed to remind myself of the world through a child's eyes:

*There is a match going on at training. Lorraine is marking Sophie very tightly, and as Sophie attempts to pass the ball to a teammate, it is intercepted by the opponents. Frank (the coach) shouts over to Sophie: 'you panicked! You panicked and did a bad pass!'. Sophie responds to Frank by grumpily shouting back: 'I don't even know why we are doing this! There's no point!', and then she starts crying. She pulls her top up from her belly to her face and leans into the wall with her top covering her face.*

My immediate feeling towards this moment was that Sophie was overreacting. I had to place myself in her position and consider what I knew about Sophie to try to better understand the event from her perspective. Sophie was an 11-year-old girl who was normally one of the best players in the team. At that moment, her team were not offering her opportunities. Lorraine was doing a very good job of marking Sophie when Sophie was usually the best girl on the pitch. Additionally, the comment from the coach served to highlight her inability to deal with the situation at that time. All things considered, I could understand her frustration, which resulted in her crying. As well as considering how I represented this situation during analysis, during the event, I also had to reflexively avoid normalising judgement (Foucault 1979) which inferred that I felt like Sophie was overreacting. I learned to avoid reacting negatively to young people's actions, as I did not want them to change their actions because of my gaze (Foucault 1979). Instead, I took time when writing up notes and during analysis to view the moment from the participants' perspectives.

### ***Child-led Conversations and Sensitivity***

In the field, the researcher has important decisions to make regarding the level of interactivity they will engage in and their effect on the production of social behaviors. In some cases, I wanted to ask more about certain issues, but I realised the need for behavior to develop naturally without my intervention. Therefore, I had to choose the right time to seek information. For example, rather than asking questions about players' perceptions of some of the girls getting emotional during training and in matches, I waited for interviewees to address it. Importantly, I did not want interviewees telling the girls who had got upset that I had been asking about them. I was fearful that this would break their trust in me. This excerpt from the semi-structured interview with Gemma

demonstrates how a discussion which initially related to the physical strength of boys and girls, changed to focus on how she felt when boys or girls cried:

*Interviewer:* So, do you think that boys are stronger then?

*Gemma:* Some boys. Like James isn't, because if you like touch his face he'll start crying. And Michelle, Michelle is like really tall and everything, and she acts all strong, but if someone says something to her, like meanly, she will start crying.

*Interviewer:* What do you think about that, about those two crying if you say anything mean?

*Gemma:* Because like, just then, Michelle started crying because Ruth told her off for doing mean faces at Frank when he gave her some advice about passing into people [...] If that was me, yeah, I'd feel a bit sad, and then I'd say sorry to Frank, sorry to Ruth as well, and then I wouldn't start going off crying and getting a strop.

Researchers have previously documented the power tensions related to adult researchers as 'expert knowers' interviewing children (Prior 2016). I was reflexively aware that my position as an adult and a researcher may risk positioning me as a powerful adult. Children's understandings of power may relate to Foucault's (1979) discussions of panopticism. They may engage in self-surveillance and act in ways they believe to be socially acceptable for fear of an adult gaze. As a result of this possibility, I made attempts to assume a learning role during interviews and junior players led the conversations. Sensitive topics were left to emerge organically through instigation by participants, so I did not appear to be a powerful adult interrogating child or judging their friends' actions.

Additionally, researchers must respond to child participants sensitively and remain open-minded about the direction and depth of conversations, even at the risk of not gaining desired knowledge. I had to be mindful not to impose adult power over the

participants, and instead ensure that they felt powerful. Sensitivity was exemplified when Lucy explained how girls prefer to wear skorts (a skirt with shorts sewn in underneath) rather than shorts because they look more ‘ladylike’: ‘*but I prefer it anyway because, erm [long pause] because they just look nicer... on girls, because, I don’t know, it just makes them look quite ladylike*’. I probed and asked her to explain why she preferred to wear a skort. Lucy then assertively retorted, ‘*because I was born a girl, so I just want to be a girl!*’. Her agitation meant I decided not to probe any further. She had clearly become uncomfortable, so I decided it was right to end the conversation at the expense of gaining further information. I tried to diminish traditional adult-child power relationships and obvious classification differences between myself as an adult and child participants (Foucault 1982), by not asserting my desire for further explanation. For participants to feel comfortable, I wanted to avoid the reproduction of dominant discourses which mark adults and children as different and disempower children.

### ***Embracing Organic Research***

The hierarchised surveillance which is often evident from adults to children emphasises a disciplinary power which is discreet and may encourage children to develop self-surveillance (Foucault 1979). I had to remove perceptions of my adult power and to try to reduce resulting normalised behavior by children. Casual interviews in the field seemed to encourage participants to feel comfortable as we were often sat cross-legged on the floor during informal moments. Additionally, I avoided constant questioning so that I had less of an impact on the natural development of conversations. An example of this was when two female players entered a conversation I was having with Ralph. The participant-led conversation demonstrated some strong reactions to discussions of love:

*[Lorraine and Sophie say something about using Ralph’s mobile phone]*

*Interviewer:* [laughs and then asks Sophie] So... What? You've done what? You've written I love...

*Lorraine:* Lorraine!

*Sophie:* Ralph gave me his phone.

*Ralph:* And this leads on to the other question of boyfriend/girlfriend, I thought we were just kind of like having a joke about really.

*Interviewer:* How did you feel Lorraine, when you first thought that Ralph was the one to say that he loves you?

*Lorraine:* I wanted to punch him in the face!

*Ralph:* Oh, you're nice!

*Lorraine:* [laughs] I actually did.

*Ralph:* I would never do that.

*Sophie:* She wanted to punch you in the face all because of me [laughs].

*Ralph:* You're nice Sophie.

This conversation enabled me to question performances in relation to dominant gender discourses. If other participants decided to enter interviews or conversations, I did not prevent this happening as I did not want to assert any authority. Where possible, I wanted to reduce the difference in classification of myself as an adult and participants as less-powerful children (Foucault 1979). A good way to do this was to let them take the lead and let situations change and develop organically without my interference. These impromptu conversations were also similar to peer interviewing which arguably alleviates the power relationship between an adult researcher and youth interviewees (Quarmby 2014).

## **Conclusion**

This research adds more generally to the relatively limited field which concentrates on hearing young people's voices in physical activity research, and more specifically to child-centred ethnographies in the same field. Additionally, this paper has drawn on an ethnographic study with children in a physical activity setting to present an emphasis on

the importance of adopting an organic process when conducting empirical research with children. Although not representative of all research with children, it offers some considerations related to child-centred research. Examples of research-related considerations and complexities represented through empirical data aimed to demonstrate how these meaningful parts of an organic process can transpire in practice.

The Foucauldian lens adopted in this research helped analyse how techniques of power and discourse are related to research with children. Understanding how adults and children can be classified differently and the resulting expectations related to uneven power distribution made me aware of my role as an adult researcher helping the coach at training. The extended time spent with participants as part of the ethnographic process helped alleviate this division and I became less aligned with the coaches and other adults and more aligned with the young participants. I made conscious decisions to avoid disciplining participants or reacting negatively to moments and interactions that I witnessed or was part of. Becoming part of the participants' normal routines over a prolonged time also alleviated the prominence of my researcher role.

Embracing an organic approach to research also helped minimize my researcher status. Predominantly relying on data collection from interactions and events which arose organically meant that participants were not frequently reminded of my researcher status through implemented data collection strategies. Nevertheless, participants were invited to talk to me in a semi-structured interview format 10-months into the study, but these were still informal and flexible. In semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, children were welcomed when they approached the discussion with other participants and left the conversations as they wished too. I reacted to participant unease with sensitivity, changing conversations at the expense of gaining knowledge. The organic approach also included being flexible about where and when data collection

might take place in emerging moments, and letting data arise naturally without my instigation, especially in relation to sensitive topics or discussions about other participants.

Adopting an organic approach to research may help reduce young participants' perceptions of adult power. Adopting a Foucauldian lens can also heighten awareness of power divisions and aid the researcher's sensitivity to their own use of techniques of power whilst in the field. Additionally, an organic approach can also help facilitate child-centred research which empowers participants and supports their voices being heard.

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