6 Memories of Youth and Interviewing Young People: Reflections on Young People's Understandings of Drug Use

ROB PATTMAN AND MARY JANE KEHILY

Introduction

This paper draws on a qualitative study of young people in Milton Keynes and their understanding of drugs and drug use[1]. It focuses, partly, on the relationship Rob Pattman established with Susie, a young woman he was interviewing about her views on life in general and drugs in particular. We are interested in the kinds of identities that young people were establishing in relation to each other. Our view is that interviewers do not elicit descriptive accounts from interviewees. Rather, the interviewees construct their identities through what they say about themselves and others, and this depends, crucially, on how they position and are positioned by the interviewer (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Frosh et al., 2002; Walkerdine et al., 2001). As the above authors have argued, the sorts of feelings interviewees evoke in interviewers must be acknowledged and addressed since these provide important insights into the dynamics of the interviewer- interviewee relationship.

Some researchers (eg. Walkerdine et al., 2001; Thorne, 1993) attributed these feelings to identities and relations established in the past. Walkerdine et al. (2001), in their longitudinal study of girls in the UK point out that 'some of the middle class girls initially evoked our envy' (p.84) and also seemed 'strange' - causing them to reflect on their own working class backgrounds. In her ethnographic study of gender identities and interaction in an elementary school in the US, Barrie Thorne (1993) felt 'envy' and 'aversion' for particular girls, and wanted to be in the company of some girls rather than others. She attributed this to the ways she positioned herself in the past in hierarchical relations with other girls. Rob also found that he liked some of the young people he interviewed, such as Susie, more than others, and that the feelings our subjects elicited in him reminded him of similar feelings he had when we he was their age. In order to understand our reactions to the young people Rob interviewed, the project team engaged in 'memory work,' (Haug et al., 1987) on the topic 'me and drugs in our teens'. This involved Rob and Mary Jane writing and then discussing these in terms of key emerging themes and the kinds of emotions they elicited. Researchers engaging in this kind of

autobiographical work have taken a social constructionist approach, arguing that memories 'don't reveal the past "as it actually was"' (Personal Narratives Group, 1988, p.261) but are versions of the past which become significant in relation to the ways we construct our identities. Hence we are strongly invested in certain 'well worn' memories (Kehily, 1995). In this paper, we examine and compare our (well worn) tales about 'me and drugs.' We look, too at how Susie spoke about drugs, comparing her narratives with our own, and focusing on the feelings that were generated by the research encounter.

The Study

Using interviews that were loosely structured around the general theme 'being a young person of their age', the research discussed issues such as interests and leisure pursuits, pleasures and anxieties, self definitions and relations with others. The interviews were young person centred, with the interviewer, Rob Pattman, playing a facilitative role encouraging the young people to set the agenda, and picking up on issues they raised (for an example of this research approach see Frosh et al., 2002). Drugs, especially tobacco and alcohol and to a lesser extent cannabis, emerged as key topics in most of the interviews, and were spoken about at length and in emotionally engaged ways by 'users' and 'non users'.

Our Stories

We begin by comparing our autobiographical accounts about drugs and on how we recall ourselves in these.

Rob's Story

> I was always dead scared of drugs. I was a health freak for as long as I can remember and there was something really sinister in my mind about getting addicted and especially to an everyday thing like smoke. But at school I sometimes wished I wasn't like that as the people I liked and admired began to smoke and also told stories about drinking and getting drunk, and I couldn't even imagine myself drinking. I wished like mad it wasn't naughty to smoke and drink and take drugs, as I liked being naughty and was good at it.
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> But I managed to get into trouble with drugs and illegal ones as well. It was at a big anti drugs talk the head teacher had organised in the wake of the immediate expulsions of 2 boys for smoking cannabis. The speaker was a medical expert and had a drug takers' kit with drug users' paraphernalia as well amazingly as samples of the drugs themselves sealed in little cellophane bags. This really grabbed my attention and especially when he passed them around for us to look at and touch.

We were in the presence of heroin and were actually going to be as close as to touch it. I remember thinking when the heroin came to me how ordinary it looked, a bit like seeing someone on TV in everyday life. When it came to me I didn't pass it on but put it under my bum. I wanted to hide it and see what would happen. There were about 100 of us assembled in the hall and so it took some time for all the stuff to get round. When it did and when the medical expert and headteacher realised what was missing, panic set in and they demanded to know where it was and said no-one was going to leave until they found out. I also started to panic. I didn't realise how serious they would get. I was wondering whether to sit it out, stick it in my pocket and throw it away as soon as I got out, but they were freaking out and I couldn't bear the pressure and what if they body searched everyone. So I put my hand up and said 'Oh look what I've just found'. I said it was on the floor and must have fallen out of my hand as I was passing it on. I don't know whether they believed me but they were relieved to get it back. The headteacher looked pissed off with me but nothing happened to me. I made sure my friends knew what I'd really done.

Mary Jane's Story

Me and drugs - now there's an ooh-er subject. I suppose it's a bit like adultery. The fantasy is better than the reality. Being wined and dined, transported from a world of domestic drudgery into a romantic haven of clandestine meetings, intense desire and the naughtiness or knowing that such excitement shouldn't be indulged. Or alternatively, floating in a drug induced pleasuredome is infinitely more attractive than the banal routines of everyday life. Or so it seems. My experience in retrospect, on both scores, is that the high is short lived, the come-down painful and drawn out and the emotional fall-out devastating. But then I am nearly fifty with a respectable job and my druggie past well behind me.

At the risk of turning this into a middle aged morality tale, I will try to recount some experiences from the past. The small spa town that I grew up in was awash with drugs. Maybe it was the sleepiness of the place - pretty but boring - or the presence of loads of rich kids with excess money. Anyway drugs were hard to avoid. My brother became heavily involved in the drug scene - knew all the dealers and users, what was around, what it was like and how much it was going for. There was a lot of work involved in achieving and maintaining such knowledge. I suppose I was interested but not up to dedicating my life to it like he did and it didn't seem so appropriate for girls anyway.

Then there was a boyfriend of mine at that time. A friend of my brothers, he had a similar approach to pleasure seeking and knew a lot about drugs by Leamington standards. His search for good times took him to Amsterdam in the mid 1970s and when he came back I hardly recognised him. He looked much older, dishevelled and, well, I'm not sure what was wrong with him but he wasn't quite with us mentally. My brother said he had acid psychosis. Taking LSD every day had taken its toll and now he was subject to flashbacks, muscle spasms and a difficulty distinguishing between tripping and reality. Or so they said. To this day his story exists in my mind as a kind of salutary tale - a reminder that you have to watch out. Pleasure comes at a cost - it's dangerous to like anything too much -

> personal boundaries and self-discipline are important. Yes, here I go again the ever-moderate voice of fucking reason. I'm so boring I even bore myself. All of this is a way of saying that despite smoking cannabis and taking acid, I suppose my teenage years and early adulthood were marked by a feeling of being too straight and too scared to be a junkie. Not an identity I'm entirely comfortable with.

Both our stories indicate that we attach much significance to drugs in our mid to late teens. Mary Jane also writes about herself in later life, but it is in her youth where the 'story' takes on a conventional narrative form (Labov, 1972) to illustrate the central theme, the pleasures of drugs and the dangers of 'liking anything too much'. Both stories focused on the symbolic significance of drugs (Rob's almost exclusively so, Mary Jane's also on the chemical effects of drugs) characterising these as powerful markers of identities. Both stories are about how they situate themselves in relation to and deal with binary oppositions that they construct through drugs (mainly legal in Rob's story and illegal in Mary Jane's). Both Rob and Mary Jane construct drugs as dangerous and derive pleasure and excitement from breaking the taboo. Rob writes about 'being in the presence of heroin,' as if the mere substance, that he is surprised to see is so 'ordinary' looking, has powerfully adverse qualities of its own. Rob attempts to break the taboo by hiding it. For Mary Jane the dangers and pleasures of drugs are related, rather, to accounts of taking them.

Rob identifies as naughty yet rejects drugs, and a key theme of his story is his opposition to drug taking as a symbol of naughtiness. But there is another powerful binary opposition that he constructs through drugs that focuses on his body which he wants to preserve as healthy in relation to the threat posed by unhealthy, and even sinister drugs. Unlike Mary Jane's story we hear nothing about drugs as pleasurable presumably because he is so invested in not taking drugs and therefore has, unlike Mary Jane, no experience of their pleasures. Rob's story indeed points towards the possible conclusion - because he does not smoke or drink he is good. His story about hiding the heroin under his bum in the school assembly marks him out as someone skilled at doing naughty things. Significantly, this story was one where he succeeded in being naughty by taking the very 'worst' drug without actually ingesting it.

Mary Jane also writes about drug taking as naughty, the naughtiness deriving from knowing that 'such excitement shouldn't be indulged.' But, unlike Rob, she contrasts the attractions of 'floating in a drug induced pleasuredome' with 'the banal routines of everyday life'. Taking drugs then is exciting because it is naughty, but also pleasurable because of the effects of the drugs themselves which she contrasts with her everyday life experiences. Her story, unlike Rob's, does not focus exclusively on being and not being naughty, but also (and much more on) being hedonistic and potentially self-destructive and being banal or dull. Her narrative about her boyfriend who left 'boring' Leamington for (presumably) exciting Amsterdam in 'search of the

good times' ends with him physically and mentally disfigured after 'taking LSD every day'. Pleasure as well as suffering is attributed to the drugs themselves, but Mary Jane's story is much more self-consciously about what drugs symbolise for her than their chemical properties. Significantly she reflects upon the boyfriend narrative not just as a tale of the potentially harmful effects of overindulging in drugs in particular, but, more generally, as a 'salutary tale' about the costs of liking '*anything* too much' (our emphasis).

Both Rob's and Mary Jane's stories reproduce quite conventional gender polarities. Rob is the central character, key mover, in his story, engineering a panic in the school assembly. In contrast Mary Jane's illustrative story about the costs of the pleasures of drugs is not so much about herself but her boyfriend, the pleasure seeker whose search for the good times ends in self-destruction. Like tales about girls and women as mothers, wives and lovers, Mary Jane in her story, defines herself and identifies in relation to a close male. Interestingly, she compares drugs with adulterous relations, and when doing so writes passively, in clichés of romantic fiction about 'being wined and dined, transported from a world of domestic drudgery'.

Our Interviewees' Accounts of Themselves and Drugs: Susie

As in Rob's story, we found that smoking and drinking were significant, for many of our interviewees as markers of identity and popularity. In most interviews we conducted, especially with those in year 10, the young people positioned themselves on a hierarchy defined by popularity. The most popular students being a combination of smokers, sporty, physically attractive, 'hard', loud and rebellious people and the least popular 'boffs' (boffins) or quiet and conscientious workers who were usually viewed as unsporty and deferential to school authority. The least popular were also seen as the least likely to smoke. These constructions of popular people were gendered, with physical attractiveness being mentioned more often as a criterion of popularity for girls and sporting ability more often for boys. We want to focus, here, on how one girl, Susie, identified herself in relation to the ways she spoke about drugs, comparing her account with Rob's and Mary Jane's stories and examining the kind of relations she and Rob established with each other and Rob's feelings for her.

Susie identified as popular, placing herself above other girls by describing them as non or irregular smokers, quiet and hard working. Susie: '*there's quiet girls and they're always sitting there, always concentrating, always doing their work, like 'do you want a fag?,' 'no I never go near it'.*

Presenting herself in sharp relief to other girls, she enjoyed telling stories about being caught by figures of authority - teachers and parents - when she was smoking cannabis.

> Susie: It makes you have proper giggles - your mate will just be sitting there just smiling at you and you'll be like (Making silly laughing noises), I remember the first time I got caught my mum was having a proper go and I was just laughing and she said 'you think its funny'. My dad was actually in the house and I started pissing - sorry - I started pissing myself laughing my dad just gave a smack in the face and I was just laughing and he was like - I was like come on then, but I couldn't really do you know what I mean.

Susie apologises for saying 'pissing,' presumably because she felt it was inappropriate in interviews conducted by an adult, yet she still said it and indeed repeated it after saying 'sorry'. 'Pissing' seemed to add to the subversive humour directed in this story against her humourless and authoritarian parents and violent father. By using 'pissing' she was also, perhaps, inviting Rob to identify with her and not be like judgmental adult figures. Significantly Rob describes the headteacher in his story as looking 'pissed off'. Susie spoke with much pleasure about going clubbing, heterosexual attractions and getting drunk and, at the end of the interview, asked, slightly apologetically, if she had been 'too open'. Asking this at the end of the interview, it seemed as if she was drawing attention to her openness with him, as she did when she said 'pissing,' rather than checking to see if this was alright by him.

Rob liked Susie partly because she was 'funny', and identified as someone who did not defer to adult authority, and he communicated this in the interview when smiling and laughing especially when she was telling tales about this. But he also liked her because she took such delight in telling him - an adult - about this. The feelings she evoked in him, then, were not quite the same as the ones he felt for 'naughty' people when he was in secondary school. He liked her because she was 'naughty', yet, at the same time, made him feel, as an adult, on a 'similar level to her'. This was apparent at the very beginning of the interview when she identified with him as an adult figure who had to 'put up with' the boys whose interview immediately preceded their one: *'They're such a pain. You're lucky we have to put up with them everyday'*. And this was reciprocated, as we see in Rob's notes:

> It felt so much easier with Susie. She was really keen to talk in a reflective and engaged way with me and, unlike the boys, didn't keep on getting distracted and farting into the microphone and joking about teachers they didn't like being drug addicts. I liked Susie because she made me feel on a similar level to her, whereas with the boys I felt like a figure of authority who had lost control. In fact at the end of the interview with the boys another teacher came in and shouted at them to be quiet and then gave me a really dirty look as if I should have controlled them.

While 'farting into the microphone and joking about teachers being drug addicts', may have chimed with Rob's fondness for being 'naughty', he did not like these boys as he did Susie, precisely because their 'naughtiness' was directed at him; treating him as a teacher figure whose authority they could disrupt. Though all the boys said they smoked tobacco and some cannabis, one of the themes which emerged from the interview with them was their intense dislike for girls who '*think* they're bad' because they take and deal in drugs. Susie was mentioned as one of these girls. Their hostility, it seemed, was provoked, at least in part, by a sense that girls were 'surpassing' them - young men who revelled in 'messing around' and being 'naughty' - at drug taking. (Interestingly Mary Jane comments in her story that being dedicated to drugs, like her brother did not seem 'appropriate' for girls.) Rob (implicitly) sided with Susie, and even admired her for taking drugs for standing up to the boys and their attempts to assert themselves in macho ways. Rob's focus on 'naughtiness' in his story is conspicuously ungendered compared with his opposition to these 'naughty' boys.

While Susie constructed herself as loud in relation to quiet deferential non smoking girls, her opposition to boys of her age for being loud and immature was a key theme in the interview. She could not imagine having close friendships or heterosexual relations with them (and, this, indeed, contributed to the boys' hostility to girls like Susie). It may be that she was positioning Rob, like the men she described below, as an older, more mature male, in whom she could confide:

> Susie: That's why we go out with 20 year olds and stuff in it, because the boys in the school as you just saw are not - they're not I dunno its hard to describe them really … People in school are the same, but people outside, I hang around with like 20 year olds and we all hang around in this flat … It's better to hang around with older people because they're more mature and they've been through it all.

Towards the end of the interview, however, Susie described her relationship with the older people and especially the men in the flat in more ambiguous terms. She spoke about her insecurities with them, emphasising the difference in their ages: 'I kind of feel left out because they're talking about older stuff and I'm still 15 and they know I'm 15,' and she was concerned about being sexually harassed by them. Rather than speaking about them, as a welcome relief from boys of her age, with whom she could talk about 'drug problems, problems you've got at home, just all problems that you can think of', she described them as 'total bums, they're always doing pills every day, drugs every day'. As in Mary Jane's story they were the experienced and committed drug takers to whom they were both attracted and repelled, signifying both the pleasures and the self destructive dangers of drugs. While Susie liked going to the flat and drinking and smoking 'spliffs', and she

imagined ‘taking pills’as the ‘next step’, as if this was a marker of age and experience, she was also concerned about becoming like them in the future.

> Susie: I don’t want to grow up like them, I don’t want to be a total bum and just like sit down, no job.
>
> Carla: I don’t want to be a nobody.

As in Mary Jane’s story she posed having a job to a life committed to drug taking. For Susie these were alternatives in the future, with Mary Jane the job (and a respectable one) was something she had now having flirted with but guarded against the latter in her ‘druggie past’.

Conclusion

Drugs (legal and illegal) emerged as powerful markers of identities in our own memories about ‘me and drugs’ as well as spontaneously in most of the young person-centred and directed interviews we conducted. They were invoked as interviewer and interviewees identified and positioned ourselves in relation to others, often evoking strong emotions as we did so. These kinds of identities were usually highly polarised and pejorative. Memories generated by our stories suggested that drugs were significant for us, (at least, then) in relation to the kind of identities we were forging. We focused on an interview with one girl, in particular, comparing themes in our stories with her narratives. Using this, we tried to illustrate the importance of ‘remembering our youth’ when explaining the kinds of relations Rob developed with the young people he was interviewing. This is important methodologically because, as Hollway and Jefferson (2000) have argued, and as we have seen in this paper, interviews do not involve interviewers simply trying to elicit the views the interviewees already have. Rather, they are co-constructions made possible by the particular, usually unconsciously mediated, relations between interviewer and interviewee/s. What Susie told Rob, the pace and direction of the interview, depended, crucially, on the feelings they developed for each other, and Rob’s feelings for her were influenced, in part, by particular memories and identifications as a young man at school.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Sarah Seymour-Smith for helpful comments.

Notes

1) The research project entitled *Young people's understandings of drugs and drug use: evidence from young people themselves* was funded by the Open University Research and Development fund. The project ran from June 2002 - July 2001. Rob Pattman carried out the fieldwork between June 2002 - July 2003. The project was directed by Mary Jane Kehily.

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