Engaging 'difficult-to-reach' young people in a study of inner-city drug use

Paula Mayock

Opiate use in Ireland is located mainly in a number of Dublin's inner-city and sub-urban communities. With no visible signs of the heroin problem abating, concern for young people is high, particularly for those living in areas where heroin use is concentrated. The study forming the focus of this chapter undertook to examine drug use by young people aged between 15 and 19 in one such locality. The research site is an area considered to have one of the most serious drug problems in the state and has been designated for inclusion in the government's Local Drug Task Force initiative.

The difficulties researchers face when attempting to collect reliable and valid quantitative data on adolescent drug use within the general population are well documented (e.g. Marsh et al., 1989; Davies and Coggans, 1991). The current study, with its emphasis on exploring subjective meanings and perceptions, presented different challenges to those associated with gathering quantitative data on young people's drug-taking history and behaviour. Unique methodological considerations arise when undertaking a study which seeks the participation of minors (Hill et al., 1996; Hill, 1998). Furthermore, the illegality of drug use places a fundamental constraint on the disclosure of details of what is usually a private and hidden activity. From the outset of the study, access was a major consideration, one which altered variously in magnitude throughout the course of the fieldwork.

The main body of the data was collected using individual in-depth interviews, and focus groups were used to investigate broader issues pertaining to young people's perception of drug use within their community. A total of 57 young people were interviewed individually and a further 24 took part in focus group discussions.

The recruitment process

The practical difficulties of making contact with a large number of young people from within a community (as distinct from a more formal setting, such as a school) were exacerbated by the sensitive nature of the topic under investigation. Numerous ethical issues, particularly those relating to confidentiality and consent, had to be

addressed prior to entering the field. This chapter will document some of the main features of the recruitment process and will then focus on a specific problem of access, namely that of securing the cooperation of a group of young people referred to here as 'difficult to reach'.

Interviewing young people from within a community setting about intimate aspects of their lives is better viewed as a process, rather than as a single isolated occurrence arranged following consent. Access routes are not clearly marked and the identification of relevant 'gatekeepers' was an essential first step. Educating others about the purpose and nature of the research (Shaffir, 1991) was critical to winning approval, acceptance and personal support from professionals who were in regular contact with prospective research participants.

Initially, the essential 'gatekeepers' consisted of youth and community workers and local drug counsellors. However, as knowledge of the social terrain expanded and additional support and acceptance were secured, this group of adult contacts was extended to include local community members who had reliable knowledge of peer networks and/or 'hunches' about the activities of certain groups. Adult informants were instrumental in making introductions to young people: their detailed knowledge of community events and local culture informed many important procedural decisions relating to access and provided short cuts to contacting a range of prospective participants.

Introductions to young people by trusted adults were vital, but were not adequate in themselves to secure cooperation. The establishment of trust and rapport was a necessary precursor to gaining the acceptance of those being studied (Wax, 1980; Fontana and Frey, 1994). Therefore, the initial task of 'getting in' was followed by the more complex research requirement of achieving status with the group. This was a dynamic process which demanded time, patience and perseverance. Active participation on the part of the researcher within a range of settings was central to what is best described as an incremental process of gaining credibility. Regular contact and involvement with various groups of young people allowed natural points of contact to emerge and assisted in the creation of contexts for non-intrusive interaction with the group. The establishment of complementary relationships (Agar, 1977), whereby the researcher played a subordinate role compared to that of prospective participants in the formation of relationships, was essential to the establishment of authentic communication patterns.

Initiative was required when it came to approaching young people directly regarding the issue of participation. In general, this interchange was somewhat more deliberate and structured than that which typified the day-to-day interactions between the researcher and the young people. This was also the stage at which greater detail about the study was communicated and when assurances regarding confidentiality were provided. The reputation of the researcher was critical to the process of recruitment, and the endorsements and affirmations of previous interviewees were influential in securing the cooperation of more resistant participants. As the fieldwork entered later phases, snowballing, whereby the sample of informants was generated

by the young people themselves (Robson, 1993), played an increasingly significant role in the recruitment process.

The amount of time invested in the participants' social milieu meant that the study embodied many ethnographic qualities. It took weeks, and in some cases months, of participation within particular settings to gain the acceptance of many informants. Involvement, observation and interaction were essential to the process of recruitment and played a pivotal role in the selection process. As the researcher learned more about the young people within the selected research locality, relevant distinctions between various types of drug user emerged and specific individuals were targeted for interview. This process of targeted selection involved constant assessments of the 'cast' of possible participants, with the recruitment of particular young people taking precedence over others during different phases of the study. This technique of judgmental sampling (Fetterman, 1991) is one upon which many fieldworkers rely. Of the range of groups targeted for participation, one was particularly challenging and time-consuming. This is the group referred to here as 'difficult to reach'.

The 'difficult to reach'

Current and ex-opiate users were considered to be an important component of the sample. Some young people were accessible through drug treatment and counselling services, from a methadone maintenance programme, and through the local community drug team and satellite clinics. In these settings, the researcher was vouched for by staff and these interviews were conducted with relative ease. However, those who had not sought treatment and who were largely unknown to drug agencies or other services presented quite a different challenge.

The difficulty of gaining access to young people who are deeply immersed in the drug scene, particularly those involved in the early stages of heroin use, has been noted previously by other researchers (Pearson et al., 1985; Pearson, 1987). The reasons for this are complex. Serious drug involvement (particularly with heroin) is a highly stigmatised activity and the fear of being judged or punished creates a powerful barrier to disclosure. Young people go to considerable lengths to conceal their drug status from both adults and peers and are unlikely to want to disclose details of their activities to anyone, particularly a stranger.

Knowledge acquired during the course of conducting fieldwork lent considerable weight to the belief that a sizeable number of young people aged between 15 and 17 were more deeply involved in drug use than might be expected. Initially, this information was based on anecdotal evidence, but it gained greater credence as time progressed and as adult informants conveyed their suspicions about the drug activities of particular groups. Finally, and importantly, those interviewed previously were instrumental in transforming these unsubstantiated suggestions into more definite and reliable data. The cooperation of a number of young informants proved to be vital in providing access routes to this group of drug takers who were undoubtedly the most elusive of all interviewees. This task of recruitment was firmly located

within the community and therefore the researcher could not benefit from the security and back-up of adults known to the targeted population (Power, 1994) Moreover, the majority of these young people were unlikely to want to make their drug-taking behaviour known to the study's gatekeepers.

A combination of strategies led to some eventual success in engaging a number of young heroin users, despite the rather prohibitive nature of this avenue of enquiry. The main contact point in achieving this was the street, which is probably the most difficult contact situation (Farrant and Merchant, 1971). Frequent visits were paid to a small number of carefully selected outdoor locations in the hope of meeting one of a number of young people with whom the researcher had previously established a trusting relationship. Much of this work was located in one large local-authority housing complex which has a large population of heroin users and has gained considerable notoriety as a 'drugs supermarket'.

Over a period of several weeks, a number of contacts were made with young heroin users and the role of the researcher was made known to them. Given that immediate acceptance could not be expected, a process of literally 'hanging around' became part of the researcher's daily routine. Frequent visits were paid to specific locations, with the regularity and quality of contact being far more significant than the duration of any one meeting aimed at enhancing relationships.

During this period, it was both unnecessary and unhelpful to provide the young people with constant reminders of the research and more productive to seek out ways of developing meaningful modes of communication. This was achieved largely by following their conversational lead and not appearing overly anxious to gain acceptance. Knowledge and understanding of the local drug culture was also important in breaking down traditional barriers to open communication.

The most influential development was that of gaining the acceptance and cooperation of one individual who occupied a central position in the social structure of the group (Fine, 1980). This high-status group member was able to allay feelings of scepticism and suspicion on the part of more hostile group members. The relationships established, although fragile initially, proved to be the researcher's most reliable means of accessing a world characterised by secrecy and concealment. Much of the success in securing some interviews hinged on a readiness to create and exploit opportunities for contact whenever possible. Knowledge and understanding of the behavioural and social norms of the group were important prerequisites to responding appropriately to individuals in a fluid situation. Having established an identity with the group, the researcher's task was undoubtedly aided by these frequently bored adolescents being intrigued by the interest of an outsider. The researcher's level of engagement with the group yielded valuable insights into the mechanisms which influence and guide young people's drug use, as well as the range of techniques they employ to conceal their behaviour from the outside world.

Conclusions

In a community-based study of this kind, access is not a one-off event. It is a social process which has to be negotiated and re-negotiated throughout the entire course of the fieldwork (Burgess, 1991). Efforts to establish contact with young people do not cease until the researcher is satisfied that every possible avenue has been explored with respect to accessing suitable participants. This involves searching through networks of friends, sympathetic acquaintances, and sometimes, complete strangers, for possible routes of access (Werner and Schoepfle, 1987). Upon entering the field, the researcher is likely to face various forms of resistance and this cannot be planned for in advance. Such unforeseen developments can be instrumental in reshaping the course of data collection, and definite plans to collect data within a specific time-span can be disrupted. Irrespective of the level of preparation, research techniques must be developed in response to emerging developments.

Given the nature of the enquiry, it was hardly surprising that difficulties arose during the course of recruiting participants for the study. More surprising, perhaps, was the number of young people who willingly agreed to participate. It must be said that the effort required to complete the interview was not insignificant. The decisions of others not to participate must also be respected. The greatest challenge will be that of representing the personal details entrusted by young people in a manner which does justice to those who gave so generously of their time and commitment.

The author is Research Fellow at the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland.

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