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Putting the party down on paper: A novel method for mapping youth drug use in private settings

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a novel method for generating context-rich knowledge about ‘hard-to-access’ places. We ground our discussion in a recent qualitative study of social settings of youth drug use in Denmark. The study confirmed that private house parties are common sites of youth drug use, although these parties presented limited opportunities for fieldwork. In response, a ‘map-task’ was introduced to the study to complement fieldwork and interviews. We assess the most significant methodological and epistemological features of this map-task, and explore how it may be used to conduct observations ‘from a distance’ in hard-to-access places. Further, we argue that the map-task has a number of analytical and logistical advantages for scholars interested in the health and social aspects of ‘hidden’ phenomena, such as youth drug use.

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1. Introduction

Laus [pointing at a map-task drawing on the table]: Here’s the couch and here’s the coffee table. Kristoffer is sitting in the couch acting cool with his girlfriend, we arrive [at his house] and he asks if we want a line [of cocaine]. We take the line and then go to the kitchen, where another mate has just prepared a new set of lines [...] then you go over and start talking to people.

Taken from an interview with two young recreational drug users, this quotation evokes the beginnings of a private house party. The interview was conducted in 2008 as part of a study of youth recreational drug use in Denmark. The study focussed on the social experience of clubbing and taking drugs, although the interviews quickly revealed that clubs and bars were not the only social settings for recreational drug use. Equally important were private house parties like the one referred to in the quote above. In fact, for some of the most drug-experienced participants private settings were the preferred arena for drug use, mainly because of the absence of more formal modes of (adult) surveillance and control in these spaces. While many participants regarded private settings as safer, more “controllable” settings for drug use, many also alluded to a range of health and social risks associated with this ‘private’ drug use. This called for an investigation of the *place* and *social*

context (Duff, 2014) of private parties, even though expanding the study to include these settings posed a number of methodological challenges. This article explores some of these challenges in assessing a novel tool, called “map-task”, for investigating private settings of youth drug use. We explore the key features of this method, and explore how it may be used to conduct observations ‘from a distance’ in hard-to-access settings like private parties. Further, we argue that the ‘map-task’ has a number of analytical and logistical advantages for scholars interested in generating rich, contextualised data on the health and social impacts of ‘hidden phenomena’ (Watters and Biernacki, 1989) such as youth drug use.

Studies of youth drug use have long indicated the importance of private spaces and settings in framing the ways in which young people consume illicit drugs, as well as the health and social risks and harms that may be associated with this consumption (Duff et al., 2007; Parker et al., 1998). Closed off as they are from harm reduction or security interventions, private settings such as homes and house parties are thought to constitute unique “risk environments” (Rhodes, 2002), compared to the bars, clubs and raves that have been much more extensively investigated (Hunt et al., 2011). There is some evidence that young people consume a wider range of illicit drugs, and in higher volumes, in private settings compared with public spaces (Race, 2009). Furthermore, private setting may be particularly attractive among more drug-experienced and/or drug-focused groups presenting unique health and social risks (Järvinen and Ravn, 2011). Likewise, private settings are known for ‘pre-loading’ in which individuals consume alcohol before going out, often implying a higher level of total consumption during the

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drinking event (McClatchley et al., 2014; Østergaard and Skov, 2014). Other evidence, however, points to reduced incidence of fights, accidents and injuries in private settings compared with public ones (Duff et al., 2007). Despite the significance of private settings in the context of young people's drug use, little is known about how private settings mediate youth drug use, what kinds of risk and protective factors may be important in such settings, and what kinds of public health and/or harm reduction strategies, if any, may be feasible in private settings. By assessing a novel method for mapping private spaces of youth drug use, this article will begin to indicate how these problems might be accommodated in studies of youth drug use, and in health and social policy responses to this drug use more broadly. We start by situating the map-task in the qualitative methods literature, before presenting preliminary data derived from its use in the Danish study noted above to illustrate the kinds of insights the task can engender.

2. Studying “hard to access” places and contexts

One of the great, enduring challenges for health and social researchers is how to produce knowledge regarding ‘hard-to-access’ populations, commonly understood to describe groups that are difficult to reach or engage in research (Watters and Biernacki, 1989). Challenges associated with gaining access to sites for social research have been identified in numerous social science disciplines, just as these disciplines have produced their own methodological, procedural and/or logistical responses to these challenges (see Heckathorn, 1997; Magnani, et al., 2005 for reviews). Barriers to participant recruitment have been especially acute in studies of health and social problems involving ‘minority’ or subcultural communities with little history of participation in public research (Heckathorn, 1997). Difficulties recruiting these ‘hard to access’ populations typically derive from either cultural or legal-institutional factors, or a mix thereof (Watters and Biernacki, 1989). Examples of cultural factors which may inhibit participant recruitment include instances where the topic of inquiry involves morally questioned or stigmatised behaviour such as racism or unconventional sexual practices (Magnani et al., 2005). Institutional factors may also play a part in restricting recruitment, particularly in instances where the research topic concerns illegal activities such as crime, drug use, prostitution, doping, illegal migration and so on, many of which are topics of great interest across the health and social sciences. Analysis of these kinds of issues typically involves institutional barriers to recruitment to the extent that prospective participants may fear the disclosure of sensitive information to third parties including law enforcement, health and social welfare services, as a result of their participation. Other scholars have identified institutional barriers to recruitment in instances where the target population has too much at stake to engage in research, for instance power elites which are often considered hard to reach (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Faugier and Sargeant, 1997). Other studies point to similar obstacles in conducting empirical research in ‘hard to access’ spaces, settings or contexts (Bondy, 2013). Such spaces may be related to hard-to-access populations, but need not be (e.g. the family, cf. Gabb, 2010, or the microcosm inside cars, cf. Barker and Weller, 2003).

Numerous strategies have been proposed to overcome barriers restricting participant recruitment within ‘hard to reach’ populations, most of which rely on some kind of ‘chain referral’ (Heckathorn, 1997) or ‘snowballing’ technique (Atkinson and Flint, 2001), whereby members of the population of interest are actively involved in the recruitment of participants, either through the use of inducements and incentives, or through appeals to solidarity and community interest. More recently, these kinds of peer based recruitment strategies have featured a variety of social media tools to promote

research projects, to facilitate recruitment, and/or to communicate research findings to target populations (see Bryman, 2012 for a review). Online recruitment and data collection techniques have proven especially effective in reaching geographically dispersed populations with loose social ties, or in instances where behaviours or phenomena of interest are not associated with a discrete community or sub-cultural formation. Examples include rare medical conditions, diasporic populations and studies of sexual behaviour among men who have sex with men (see Bryman, 2012: 658–665).

The study of young peoples’ use of illicit drugs presents additional examples of the challenges associated with recruiting ‘hidden’ populations, insofar as the illegal and stigmatised nature of youth drug use often leaves young people reluctant to participate in social research, just as the actual settings of youth drug use are often difficult for scholars to access (see Duff, 2014; Demant et al., 2010). Discussions of qualitative methodologies often involve some consideration of these problems, and the challenge of negotiating access to the research ‘field’ more directly (Bondy, 2013; Reeves, 2010; Barker and Weller, 2003). Commentators typically emphasise the high cost of gaining access, both in terms of the time required to develop rapport with participants, and the ethical and logistical challenges associated with conducting fieldwork, particularly in unconventional settings. Given these difficulties, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to alternatives to gaining *physical access* to study sites in the conduct of empirical research. In the context of youth drug use, the use of an alternative methodological approach is critical, given that gaining physical access to private settings is often difficult, if not impossible. It is also the case that the researcher’s presence may significantly disrupt the activities, practices and interactions of most interest (e.g. drug use in small groups). Both of these challenges were present in the current study, giving rise to the need for a novel method of studying private settings.

As research advanced in the Danish study it became apparent that private parties were significant sites of drug use for many participants. Many indicated that they had first been introduced to illicit drugs in private settings, and had their first experiences of consumption in these places. In the first instance, consideration was given to how to gain access to private settings to conduct observations there to complement the fieldwork undertaken in bars and clubs. However, the interview data indicated that the private parties attended by participants often included a limited number of people (between 4 and 10), significantly reducing the scope for the kinds of ‘unobtrusive’ observations that were being conducted at the same time in bars and clubs. Intervening in private settings for the purposes of conducting observations was considered problematic, given that the presence of the researcher would be likely to significantly influence the setting (Barker and Weller, 2003). For these reasons, private parties were treated as hard-to-access spaces that required other methodological approaches for their exploration and analysis. The present paper indicates how the incorporation of visual methods in qualitative interviews, exemplified by a visual technique called ‘map-task’, offered one such alternative to fieldwork in ‘hard-to-access’ settings. While we describe the methods and procedures associated with this task in detail below, in general terms, the map-task involved interviewees preparing a map of a private party they had recently attended. The aim was to produce data on the settings and contexts of private parties by mapping how specific parties develop during the course of a night. The task also permitted wide-ranging discussion of the drug use that takes place during private parties, and the activities, practices, risks and harms potentially associated with this use. Importantly, the drawings were not treated as naïve depictions of a social reality ‘out there’, but as narratives in their own right (Mason, 2005), produced as part of the interview situation (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). It is important that we briefly clarify this methodological point before introducing data derived from the use of the method.

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