

## Cannabis and smoking research: interviewing young people in self-selected friendship pairs

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### Abstract

This paper will discuss the use of paired interviewing as the main method of generating data in a study exploring the social context of young people's smoking and cannabis use. The research, conducted as part of an on-going PhD, involved 59 participants of both genders, aged 13–15 from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and with a wide range of cigarette and cannabis use experience. Participants were offered the choice of an individual interview or a paired interview with a friend of their choice, most opting for the paired format. The paper will discuss many of the methodological and ethical features of this method. In particular, it will discuss the potential for paired interviewing to access accounts generated within close friendship bonds, making this method distinctive from larger focus groups. It will also explore how paired interviewing facilitates access to interactions between participants, shedding light on many aspects of young people's social relationships and allowing occasional glimpses into more private territory. It will argue that the paired interview method can make a novel and distinctive contribution to health education/promotion research, policy and practice, and to any research that aims more fully to understand aspects of young people's social worlds.

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### Introduction

#### Research with young people

Much research has been carried out on, rather than with, children and young people (Oakley, 1994) and is based on the assumption that children compared to adults are often developmentally incomplete (Mayall, 2000). Emerging sociological perspectives, on the other hand, view children and young people as social actors in their own right (Mayall, 1996, 1999). According to this view, the research enterprise is primarily concerned with reaching a greater understanding of young people's perspectives on their social lives. This distinction is crucial since how the researcher 'sees' young people is fundamental to the development of a coherent methodological framework (Morrow and Richards, 1996). From this standpoint, young people have a right to have their voices heard and their opinions sought in matters affecting their lives. Teenage smoking and drug cultures in particular have remained stubbornly impervious to simplistic, adult-centred health education messages that ignore young people's perspectives (Shucksmith and Hendry, 1998). Approaches which seek to more fully understand teenage substance use by drawing on young people's expertise are both methodologically and ethically robust (Mauthner, 1997; Mayall, 2000). Treating young people as 'experts' on their own lives can help to balance the power dynamics in the research relationship, creating a safer, more relaxed atmosphere and encouraging the generation of richer, more insightful data which more accurately represent aspects of young people's lives. This paper

will seek to show that paired interviewing conducted within the framework of a coherent methodological strategy can critically engage young people and elicit thoughtful, reflective accounts, shedding new light on many aspects of young people's social lives. Such an approach is consistent with emerging perspectives in health promotion which locate young people's smoking and cannabis use within their social and cultural worlds, and offer alternative approaches to addressing some of the challenges facing young people today.

### **Interviewing children and young people**

Shedding light on young people's perceptions and understandings presents many challenges; in particular, fostering and maintaining participants' interest and motivation, and generating data that is firmly grounded in young people's social realities (Gray *et al.*, 1997). Qualitative interviewing is generally regarded as an appropriate method for generating data with young people (Mahon *et al.*, 1996; Morrow and Richards, 1996). The assumption is that young people can and do create meaningful worlds, and are able and willing to communicate their perceptions to an adult in the context of an interview (Miller and Glassner, 1997). Most commonly, this involves two distinctive approaches—individual interviews or focus groups, or a combination of the two. Some methodological critiques have demonstrated that different qualitative methods generate different responses from the same participants (Backett and Alexander, 1991; Michell and West, 1996). Paired interviewing represents both a relatively novel approach to interviewing young people and provides an opportunity to shed further light on this finding. To date, paired interviewing has been used mostly with very young children. A recent study aimed at exploring younger children's knowledge invited children aged 5 and 6 to talk with the researcher in pairs. Choosing a friend to take part with them in order to offset the inhibiting potential of the setting created a supportive social context which enabled the participants to engage

fully in conversation. In this same study, paired interviews also facilitated an exploration of family settings, with a child and a parent taking part in the interview. In this way, these 'research conversations' offered insights into what children know and to some extent, how they learn (Mayall, 2000). In another study on healthy eating with primary school children aged 5–9, the paired interview format provided a forum in which the young participants felt comfortable enough to quibble with each other, call each other names and argue over 'who knows best'. Mixed-sex pairs were used, allowing for an exploration of gendered power relationships between children (Mauthner, 1997). A study investigating peer pressure to smoke invited young people aged 12–14 recruited from a secondary school to form their own small interview groups. Most opted for groups of three, although some participants chose a paired format (Michell, 1997). These small groupings differed from most focus groups both because of their size and because they consisted of self-selected friends which provided a natural social network. Other studies have acknowledged the diverse preferences of 10–14 year olds by offering participants a choice of group discussion, paired or individual interview (Edwards and Alldred, 1999). Building on these school-based studies, the author's research aims to explore paired interviewing with young people in the more naturalistic setting of youth clubs.

### **Understanding the social context of young people's use of cannabis and cigarettes**

Most previous research on cannabis has been constructed around concepts of addiction, deviance or risk. More recent studies suggest that cannabis use has become 'normalized' to some degree among some groups of young people (Measham *et al.*, 1994), although others caution against concluding that increasing usage is inevitable (Wibberley, 1997). Some studies highlight the relationship between young people's cannabis use and friendship networks (Bell *et al.*, 1998), and with having 'time out' (Parker *et al.*, 1998).

Another study reports that cannabis use may act for some as a gateway activity into cigarette smoking (Albutt *et al.*, 1995). These studies offer some insights into young people's use of cannabis, but we still know relatively little about the contemporary social contexts within which cannabis is used. Building on this previous work, the author's study aims to shed further light on the meaning and use of cannabis and cigarettes in young people's lives, and to explore the inter-relationship between these two behaviours.

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### Reflections on methods

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The research comprises 30 interviews with 13–15 year olds from a wide range of backgrounds, and with different patterns of use and non-use of cannabis and cigarettes. The participants were recruited from six geographical locations, mostly in Edinburgh and East Lothian, providing an urban/semi-rural mix. An exploratory fieldwork phase which set out to involve groups of young people, in practice generated paired interview data as well as group data. Seeking to build on this unintended but fruitful start, the researcher then selected paired interviews as one option for the major fieldwork phase. This format soon became established as the main method for generating data as more and more participants chose to be interviewed with a friend. Borrowing from ethnographic traditions, interview data were supplemented with data generated by other methods including discussions with youth workers, informal conversations with young people and fieldwork notes based on observations within the various settings. This provided a broader contextual framework to aid understanding. Young people were recruited from youth clubs and community centres in order to provide a more naturalistic setting than school-based studies. This allowed the researcher to accord the participants a greater degree of autonomy and influence than is likely to prevail in other, more formal settings (Fast Forward Positive Lifestyles, 1994; Hyde *et al.*, 2000), and provided access to stories generated through the kinds of spontaneous interactions common in youth clubs (Green and Hart, 1999). She purposefully

presented herself as a former community worker, as well as a research student interested in finding out more about young people's lives. Highlighting her past experience in youth work and positioning young people themselves as 'experts' on their own lives helped to lend credibility to the research and encouraged uptake by participants. Meeting with young people prior to interview and giving them a choice about how they could take part also helped to create a better balance in the relationship between researcher and participants. One limitation of the informal setting was that in a few cases, participants became distracted by events going on elsewhere in the youth club. This was a minor problem, though, and it was more easily managed than in larger focus groups. Such occasions also provided additional contextual data about aspects of young people's social relationships with one other. Most interviews lasted around 40 min, a few somewhat longer. In most cases, the researcher gained access to young people through a youth worker, met with the young people and spent time in the research setting prior to the interviews. Consent to participate was sought from young people themselves on an ongoing basis and the researcher held early meetings to explain the research and distribute written information sheets. Participants were given the choice of pairing up with a friend or taking part in an individual interview. A loosely structured topic guide was used in conjunction with a card game introduced towards the end of some interviews in which participants were invited to 'agree' or 'disagree' with statements written on cards and then to explain their choice. This additional activity was introduced as a way of trying to elicit more detailed accounts from participants and was used mostly with young men who in general tended to be less forthcoming than the young women.

### Reflecting on young people's choice of interview method

Of the 30 interviews, 21 were paired interviews, five were individual interviews and four were threesomes. All but one of the paired interviews comprised same sex groupings. In most cases, the

alternative one-to-one and threesome formats arose out of circumstances prevailing on the night rather than being the first choice of participants, although there is one significant exception where three young men insisted on being interviewed together. Apart from this particular threesome, the formation of the small groups was more to do with expediency than choice and this may have contributed to a consistent dynamic in these interviews whereby two out of three participants tended to dominate the discussion. This self-selected threesome will be discussed later together with data from the paired interviews, exploring in particular the significance of the close friendship bond. Without exception, the one-to-one interviews were the result of young people consenting rather than actively choosing this method as part of a negotiated process about how to manage situations where participants were absent. These interviews generated individual data, mostly 'public' in nature, but by definition were unable to access interactions between participants. In this project, at least, the paired interview format was clearly the popular choice among young people themselves.

### **Paired interviews in practice**

In this study, paired interviews offered many practical advantages. At the early stage of negotiating access, this format, together with a flexibility of approach which offered young people a choice, represented a good 'fit' with informal settings. Such an approach is consistent with youth work values, and in most cases was rewarded with a cooperative and supportive response from adult gatekeepers. Recruitment was also relatively straightforward. Irrespective of age, gender and socioeconomic circumstances, the young people visibly relaxed and became more enthusiastic about participating when it became clear that they could choose to take part with a friend. Paired interviews were also relatively easy to set up and suffered a very low drop-out rate. Participants who were comfortable and familiar with one another, and who had some degree of control over the interview, also offered a more naturalistic context, and facilit-

ated a better balance in the relationship between interviewer and participants. This facilitated the process of developing trust and rapport, and helped to generate high quality data, although two interviews were less successful than the others. In one case, the researcher had not met the participants prior to the interview and hence had not begun to establish a relationship with them. In the other, a subsequent discussion with the youth worker confirmed that the participants' non-engagement with the interview was typical of the way they handle social relationships. This latter case suggests that paired interviewing may not be appropriate for some types of peer relationship. In most cases, it was relatively easy to distinguish between participants in the taped interview and to make out most of what was said, in contrast with larger focus groups. The typed transcripts therefore provide a relatively complete and highly accurate representation of how conversations developed in the course of the interviews. While these practical benefits are significant in themselves, it was in the context of the actual interviews that paired interviews really came into their own as a highly effective method of generating data with young people.

### **Social exchange within close friendship bonds**

In her study of peer group hierarchies, Michell noted that focus groups provide access to well-rehearsed 'public knowledge', and encourage types of social exchange that serve to reflect and reinforce such hierarchies (Michell, 1999). In encouraging some forms of social interaction over others, focus groups could then be said to be operating in similar ways to broader peer networks. The next part of the paper will attempt to shed light on how the close friendship bond present in paired interviews influences the types of accounts generated. Illustrative examples labelled with pseudonyms drawn from a broad cross-section of interview transcripts will be presented. In developing her analysis, the researcher draws on her experience and understanding of the whole interview rather than treating extracts of data in isolation from their broader context.

As with focus groups, the data provide rich descriptive accounts of many aspects of participants' day-to-day lives. However, one key feature which seems to differentiate paired interviews from focus groups is their potential for offering glimpses into more personal territory, in particular the private emotional worlds of young men. This is significant given that other studies have reported that neither focus groups nor one-to-one interviews have been able to access these kinds of account, particularly from low status young men (Michell, 1999)

In this first extract involving two boys who appeared to be members of an older peer group, a superficial reading may conclude that it is simply a comment about peer group norms. However, this account came right at the end of the interview and contrasted with earlier narratives favouring individual choice over other factors as an explanation for trying cannabis. The general demeanour of the participants also changed as the interview progressed, from bravado to more serious and measured engagement with the interview. Given these circumstances, their later account can be read as an expression of vulnerability in relation to pressure from peers to try cannabis:

So why do you think most folk get into it [smoking cannabis], what is it that makes folk get started? [Interviewer]

Just like. [Nathan, 13]

Just too common—people are daein'<sup>1</sup> it around you and you're expected tae dae it and you just dae. [Neal, 14]

Like, people'll go, I'm no' daein' that, and then they'll just try it, eh, to see what its like. And then you'll be, like, smoking it another time. [Nathan, 13]

Do folk ever try and force other folk to do it? [Interviewer]

Aye, you can try and say, nup, you say, naw, I've had too much, and they say, aye I've out-smoked you—and try and get you to take mair. [Neal, 14]

This extract provides an interesting glimpse into how norms and practices operate in relation to cannabis in this particular peer group. However, more significantly, it also demonstrates how the burden of peer expectation can lead to a sense of resignation. This contrasts sharply with the more common tendency for young men to frame their explanations in ways that emphasize their personal autonomy.

The next extract involves two older lads who appeared confident and popular within their wider peer group. Again, at an early stage, the participants discussed their smoking and cannabis use in unproblematic ways. However, later in the interview, they described how they resort to excuses and strategies in order both to control their consumption of cigarettes and to manage peer group expectation:

So you were saying that you just have a social fag nowadays. Is that kind of quite easy to do given, you know, if other folk are smoking quite a lot around you. [Interviewer]

It's a' right actually cause like I've got a sore throat so I can't smoke. [laugh] [Barry, 15]

Is that a good excuse then? [Interviewer]

Aye. [Barry, 15]

What about yourself? How often would you say you smoke now? [Interviewer]

Em about 10 a day maybe. If everyone else is smoking and I don't want one, I'll just like say, I've not got many left to do me the rest of the day and I'll just think I can't have one right now. So I'll just say I'm going up the road so I'll have one before I go up or try to make up excuses not to have them. [Bruce, 15]

While these two examples fall short of revealing actual feelings, they do seem to reflect a process whereby the participants gradually feel safe and relaxed enough to let their guard down—both with the interviewer and with their fellow participant. When this happens, in some interviews at least, the stage is set for further details to be disclosed



which shed new light on the complexities of young people's social relationships and how they try to manage these.

The most vivid personal account of all, however, emerged not in a paired interview, but in a small group interview involving three young men. These participants specifically asked to be interviewed together, strongly suggesting a close friendship bond and shared history between them.

In this particular threesome, two of the participants described in quite harrowing, and yet, matter-of-fact terms how they had been violently bullied by a group of older lads, one in particular. As a result of their association with these older lads, all three, previously of good character, had begun themselves to get into trouble at school and at home. Alarm bells about possible bullying sounded earlier in the interview, but references to these were censored by one of the participants and it was only at the very end of the interview that the account began to spill out.

Two participants described how they were forced to 'clean out' bongs<sup>2</sup> which had become clogged up, a process which caused very unpleasant physical effects. The extract presented demonstrates how the bullying took a more violent turn:

'Cause I was the biggest I used to get battered, like, every day. [Barry, 13]

Me and Barry were having a joint each an' that and we were sitting there and he kent he couldnae handle bongs so he made him take a bong and Barry couldnae dae it, he didnae want any and he made him lie on the bed and put his hands against the wall and keep his legs straight and he started battering him and everything. [Brad, 13]

And I'm like that, and I went nup, I'm no' daein' it, right, and he was like, total punched me. [Barry, 13]

He punches him and goes, dae it. [Brad, 13]

And I started kicking him and everything. [Barry, 13]

And he went radge and that inside, made him kneel doon and started hitting him in the face and everything [Brad, 13]

The third participant in this threesome, a 15-year-old, was less vocal than the other two throughout the course of the interview, and seemed shy and withdrawn. He did not contribute at all to the accounts of bullying and seemed less willing than the other two to volunteer information that hinted at vulnerability. In common with the other two, however, he seemed to experience this friendship group as a safe context within which he could both give and receive support. This environment both supported his reserved demeanour and the more personal disclosures of his fellow participants, and did not hint at a 'pecking order' within this grouping. It seems likely that, as with the paired interviews, this close friendship bond played a key role in making the interview setting a 'safe' place to disclose information of a more personal nature. The fact that most participants chose the paired interview format suggests that this close bond may be played out more often among pairs of friends although the experience of this threesome demonstrates that a close friendship bond can also be present in small groups. In two out of three of these interviews, the more revealing accounts emerged in the context of the 'agree'/'disagree' card game introduced towards the end of the interview, but in the absence of a systematic comparison, it is difficult to assess its impact on the types of data generated. It seems likely that a flexible approach to interviewing young people which respects their own choices about how they would like to be interviewed is a fruitful way forward. In this way, it may be possible to encourage a process whereby some young people at least may feel comfortable enough to discuss aspects of their lives that they might otherwise keep private. It is possible of course, that hierarchies may operate even in self-selected friendship pairs, where one participant's power over the other compromises their ability to exercise free choice and to speak freely (Michell, 1999). Such a dynamic is likely to encourage certain types of social interaction and

suppress others, but it also poses an ethical dilemma for the researcher who has a responsibility to safeguard the well-being of both participants. Sensitive selection of friendship pairs, requiring prior knowledge and experience of the context, would seem to be an appropriate way of managing this potential problem.

So far, this paper has argued that paired interviews, and small, self-selected groups, can play a useful role in accessing data generated within close friendship bonds and that this may encourage young people to develop their narratives beyond well-rehearsed 'public' accounts, making them distinctive from larger focus groups. The potential for paired interviews to access many other forms of social exchange between participants was also apparent in the author's study. The next part of the paper will explore two particular aspects of these interactions—their role in shedding light on what young people know and to some extent how they learn, and their role in illuminating differences between young people and how these are played out in the paired interview setting.

### **Young people's knowledge and how they learn**

The paired interview format allowed for frequent and sustained dialogue between participants, a process possible in larger groups but likely to be much more dispersed and fragmented. Insights into how young people draw upon and understand adult concepts like 'peer pressure', for example, emerged in many of the interviews. Here, the participants present a multi-factorial explanation for why young people use substances, clearly privileging the role of choice and social interaction with peers over adult-oriented social inadequacy theories. They also move between talking hypothetically about other young people and discussing their own experience, a discursive practice that arose frequently in this study and is consistent with other studies which show that accounts of 'peer pressure' often do not distinguish between expectation and experience (Albutt *et al.*, 1995; Michell and West, 1996):

Why do you think young people get into drink like that? [Interviewer]

Well, I think you just think its fun, and sometimes it is. [Britney, 13]

They just want to try something new, they think they just want to try something for the first time and they might think that was great, I'll do it again. And sometimes, it's mainly peer pressure 'cause like if you see all your friends doing it, you think, gosh, should I do it as well [Billie, 13]

Well, I don't really think it's peer pressure as such—they might ask us and if you say no, because you are able to say no, if you say no, then they're like fine, that's OK. 'Cause you ask them, oh, do you wish to start smoking and I go, oh, it's the worst thing I ever started, then, you know, it's like, don't—don't start it. And like drinking and everything they just do it just for fun, and they think of it as fun and the next day, its like, god, remember what happened last night and they're always like, Oh. [Britney, 13]

Can't remember [laugh]. [Billie, 13]

They can't remember, or I can't believe I did that and they're laughing and everything and it's just fun. [Britney, 13]

The paired format also enabled some participants to meet the challenge of responding to questions outside their usual frame of understanding. Here, the participants, both non-smokers, begin to theorize about a practice which is completely novel to them, drawing on a range of explanatory frameworks:

Some young people who've never smoked cigarettes try cannabis and then end up smoking cigarettes on a regular basis. Have you heard of that before—some people start with cannabis? [Interviewer]

Em, I've never heard of it. [Naomi, 15]

I think it's more likely to be the other way about—you need something stronger. [Natasha, 15]

I don't see how they could get cannabis and they couldn't get cigarettes [Naomi, 15]

Maybe they just thought, oh aye, I'm hard enough to start with the strong stuff and then like, maybe take a step back and then start smoking instead 'cause they're still getting attention fae it and they feel cool [Natasha, 15]

Maybe they think that smoking's nothing—its no' going to harm you—but it really does, you can get cancer an' a' that [Naomi, 15]

But you get people with cancer who haven't smoked, and they've done nothing for it and people have smoked and think, I'll no' get that. 'Cause my cousin had cancer, she was only seven and she died from it. And it's like, you ken all these people are smoking and they think it'll never happen to me. It just shows you—it can happen to anybody [Natasha, 15]

Clearly, this kind of process also occurs in adult focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994). However, the primacy of the best friend relationship at this stage in many young people's lives may mean that paired interviews are especially useful for encouraging this particular age group to interact with each other in this way.

### **Differences between young people—argumentative interactions**

So far, this analysis has concentrated on complementary interactive processes which have largely been about consensus and the articulation of shared norms and experiences, but paired interviews also offer the potential to highlight differences between individuals. Such interactions range from simple misunderstandings to violent disagreements and include instances of participants admonishing and censoring one another. Depending on the context, participants might respond by modifying or qualifying their position, by 'climbing down', by 'agreeing to disagree', by reaching a consensus position or by shifting their position in the light of new knowledge. In this first extract, the participants speculate about a hypothetical event of some relevance in their lives—how their parents might

react if they were brought home by the police. Their initial responses reveal vastly differing views but they both modify their position as the discussion develops, perhaps as a 'face-saving' manoeuvre aimed at strengthening the social bonds between them:

What would your folks make of that, if you got taken home by the police? [Interviewer]

My ma would murder me. [Niamh, 13]

My ma wouldnae dae nothing. [Nat, 14]

Naw, I dinnae think she would go radge, but. [Niamh, 13]

I wouldnae get grounded or that, she'd just let me oot, just say watch what you're daein'. [Nat, 14]

By comparison, other differences between participants sometimes took the form of direct challenges to the accuracy or truthfulness of a participant's account. In most cases these challenges took place in the context of an interview partner 'talking up' their substance use, a discursive practice which in itself says much about the role of substances in young people's lives. Sometimes, the challenge took a non-verbal form—usually a disparaging laugh. In this example, a verbal challenge is made and the young man in question immediately accepts the alternative version presented by his interview partner, adding weight to this other, more grounded account. This exchange also sheds light on one of the shared social processes that surround young people's smoking—the ritual of chipping in together to buy cigarettes:

How many would you say you smoke? [Interviewer]

Ten a day. [Rob, 13]

Five, cos you go halfers on them. [Raymond, 13]

Aye, we go halfers and we get five each. [Rob, 13]

In some cases, participants went further, actually admonishing one another in the course of the interview. In the first example, involving the only



mixed sex pairing, the young woman in the pair seems critical of her male partner for making light of what she considers to be a serious matter. This exchange perhaps suggests a gender or an age difference in attitudes to the experience of getting ill from excessive use of cannabis:

Some folk say that sometimes its not that pleasant, actually, using hash—have you ever found that? [Interviewer]

Aye, when you take too much and you just want to be sick—you go completely green and you just cannae stop being sick. [Rosemary, 15]

Brian and Billy doon at the beach. [laugh] [Robert, 14]

That wisnae funny. [Rosemary, 15]

The second example can be interpreted in a number of ways. It could be that one participant is simply expressing her impatience with her interview partner's seeming obsession with ecstasy. However, it can also be read as disapproval at what she sees as the inappropriate disclosure of sensitive information:

See drinking as well, would folk be drinking and smoking hash, or what? [Interviewer]

Aye, popping a few eccies [ecstasy]. [Lee-Ann, 12]

Aw, shut up, Lee-Ann. [Tracey, 14]

Broader contextual factors seem to support the second interpretation. In contrast with other participants, these two young women expressed reservations about the interview being tape-recorded and were clearly nervous about being over-heard by others in the building. In fact, the interview was twice interrupted inadvertently by adults coming into the room, events which generated an angry response from one participant:

See the next time somebody walks in here, I'm going to punch them [Tracey, 14]

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## Discussion

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This paper has discussed the potential of paired interviewing to elicit young people's perspectives

on their smoking and cannabis use behaviour in the wider context of their social environments. It has argued that at a practical level, self-selected paired interviews offer a fresh approach to the difficult enterprise of accessing and accurately representing aspects of young people's lives. Inviting young people to pair up with a friend appears to facilitate access and recruitment, as well as helping to maximize the accuracy and completeness of transcribed interview data. This is in contrast to some of the difficulties reported with larger focus groups where interview recordings have proved impossible to transcribe because of young people talking at once, frequently interrupted one another and where individual speakers could not be identified (Michell and West, 1996). The format is clearly popular with young people themselves, and is highly effective in engaging and maintaining their interest and motivation, one of the formidable challenges in young people's research (Gray *et al.*, 1997). In treating young people as active participants in the research process (Alderson, 1995), paired interviews also address many of the ethical challenges of conducting research with young people. Acknowledging and drawing upon young people's 'expert' status can address the power imbalance in the research relationship and encourage the generation of richer data, although care needs to be taken to ensure that power differentials are absent from the friendship pairs themselves. Peer relationships which are structured by a hierarchy or which have a competitive element to them may benefit from a different approach. A crucial starting point is meeting with young people on their own terms prior to the interview. This is fundamental to developing rapport and goes a long way towards minimizing unhelpful dynamics during the interview itself. Early discussion with key informants can also help to ensure that recruitment decisions about the formation of interview pairs or groupings are ethical and fair to all potential participants.

The central argument of the paper is that paired interviews represent a novel addition to qualitative interviewing techniques. In many respects, they complement focus groups in their potential for

accessing interactions between participants and for generating data which illuminate many aspects of young people's daily lives. Illustrative examples from interview transcripts have shown, for example, young people challenging adult discourses and trying to make sense of unfamiliar concepts. Data which highlight differences and how these are played out in the interview setting have also provided fascinating glimpses into how young people manage this aspect of their social relationships with one another. However, what makes paired interviews distinctive from larger focus groups is their potential for accessing accounts generated within close friendship bonds. This dynamic seems to encourage young people, especially young men, to take tentative steps into more personal territory, providing occasional glimpses into their private, emotional worlds. This dynamic is not unique to paired interviews—it can also be present in small, self-selected groups—a finding consistent with a recent key study on young people's smoking behaviour (Michell, 1996; Michell and West, 1997). Respecting young people's choices about how they would like to be interviewed would seem to be an appropriate methodological feature of any study which seeks to understand more about young people's health-relevant behaviours, so long as this choice is freely made by all the participants.

### **Implications for health education/ promotion research, policy and practice**

The popularity of paired interviewing with young people themselves and its potential for shedding new light on young people's perspectives on health-related issues make this method a promising addition in health research. The findings presented in this paper can only be considered exploratory, however, and further research is required to undertake a more systematic comparison of focus groups and paired interviews. Such a study could explore the extent to which self-selected paired interviews represent 'best friend' relationships in young people's social worlds, while focus groups may operate in similar ways to broader peer networks in the forms of social exchange they encourage.

In this way, the subtleties of the different relationships and social interactions in young people's lives and how these influence the expression of views, beliefs and experience can be explored. Paired interviews, in common with focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994), also have great potential in generating concepts far more useful to health education/promotion policy and practice than more deductive approaches. Insights into how young people challenge adult discourses on concepts like 'peer pressure', for example, can help practitioners to develop new approaches with young people which move beyond 'adultist' assumptions. Understanding more about the theories and concepts that young people draw upon to make sense of their smoking and cannabis use behaviour can also help to make initiatives more salient in young people's lives. It becomes clear, for example, that there is no single young person's perspective on smoking and cannabis use—these activities have socio-cultural meanings particular to different youth cultures and sub-cultures (Albutt *et al.*, 1995; Bell *et al.*, 1998; Pavis and Cunningham-Burley, 1999). Health education/promotion initiatives aimed at addressing young people's substance use can usefully take account of such insights by finding ways of contextualizing smoking and cannabis use within young people's social and cultural worlds. A more insightful understanding of young people's social relationships with one another, e.g. how they manage difference, is also valuable and could perhaps lead to the development of more interactive forms of health education/promotion which draw on this sort of dynamic. Paired interviews, then, offer a novel context within which young people can discuss, debate and theorize about aspects of their social worlds, offering occasional glimpses into more private territory. By harnessing this knowledge and working as equal partners, health education/promotion can more effectively address some of the challenges facing young people today.

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### Notes

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1. The interviews were conducted in Scotland with young Scottish people, and have been transcribed verbatim using the language and expressions used by the participants. The quotes presented in the text of this paper therefore include many examples of Scottish vernacular.
2. Bonges are a method of using cannabis, common in some youth sub-cultures and capable of producing more potent effects than joints rolled with tobacco.

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