Involving young people as researchers: uncovering multiple power relations among youths

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Abstract
In this paper, we address the issue of giving young people a voice by involving them as interviewers in the research process. While highlighting the beneficial outcomes and the empowering potential of this method, we critically discuss the assumption that peer-led interviews create less hierarchical power relations as no adult is involved. We thus caution against seeing this method as the ultimate solution to young people’s marginalization. Considering that participation is a form of power, we argue that it is essential to acknowledge and work with the power relations that characterise young people’s everyday lives and that thus also affect the creation of a participatory arena with them. Power relations among young people, however, have been mainly neglected in previous research. The paper draws on a participatory research project conducted with young people (14-16 years old) in rural east-Germany that focuses on the complexity of young people’s daily life experiences and perceptions of their future prospects.

Keywords: methods, empowerment, participation, rural youth, young people as researcher
Addressing the ‘politics of childhood’

Geographers have recently called for a greater engagement with inequalities through less hierarchical practice in social geography (Cloke 2002; Kitchin & Hubbard 1999; Pain 2003, 2004). Matthews et al. (1999) have emphasised that there should not be a separation between academic work challenging the marginalization of those who are facing exclusion and marginalization (Kesby 2000; Mattingly & Falconer-Al-Hindi 1995). Researchers examining young people should therefore take responsibility for addressing the politics of childhood (Valentine, 1996). There is a need to listen to original young voices rather than relying on adult interpretations of their lives (Aitken 2001; Haudrup Christensen 2004; James & Prout 1997; Matthews et al. 1998b; Matthews 2001a; Matthews & Limb 1999; Morrow & Richards 1996; Philo, 1992).

In this context, participatory research is seen as one way to foreground the perspectives of young people and to identify, and challenge, forms of social exclusion they face (Alderson 2000; Cahill 2004; Pain 2004). In this paper we will focus on one specific form of young people’s participation in the research process: their involvement as interviewers.

This technique is advocated as a method that allows a less hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the researched to develop (Alderson 1995, 2000). It is argued that young people identify relevant topics and discuss them more openly and freely than they would with an adult researcher (see Alderson 1995; Kellett et al. 2004; Lansdown 2001), resulting in a deeper insight into young people’s life-worlds. Considering that young people and children “ask different questions, have different priorities and concerns and see the world through different eyes” this method can make an “important contribution to knowledge [that] can only be made by children themselves” (Kellett 2005: 3).

However, we argue that the implications of involving young people as researchers have not yet been fully considered. Scant attention has been given to power relations that exist among young people themselves (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Matthews et al. 1998a; Panelli et al. 2002). Young people’s active involvement can also have exclusionary and disempowering effects and must take care not to exclude certain groups of young people (see Boyden & Ennew 1997; Hart 1997; Matthews 2001b; Vandenbroeck & Bie 2006).

This paper foregrounds these multiple power relations and examines what implications they have for involving young people in participatory research and the
kind of insights that these techniques can give into young people’s everyday lives. In doing so, we warn against the oversimplification that young people’s involvement in research offers a solution *per se* to their marginalisation. Empirical evidence will be drawn from research that involved 14-16 year olds as interviewers and interviewees in a project that examined young people’s lives in rural eastern Germany.

**Empowerment through participation: the theoretical context**

‘Empowerment’ is characterised by engaging participants in the research process to minimise the power hierarchy between the researchers and researched. It allows participants to develop a critical understanding of their own life-situation and leads to the development of strategies to challenge inequalities (see Barry 1996; Bowes 1996; McIntyre 2003; Pini 2002, 2004). Empowerment can be seen as “the end result of participative practices where each participant has control and/or influence over issues of concern to them” (Barry 1996: 2).

Empowering young people in research has been put into practice very differently, ranging from simply listening to children, up to including young people in most or all phases of the research (Alderson 1995, 2000; Boyden and Ennew 1997; Kellett et al. 2004; Landsdown 2002; Lewis and Lindsay 2000). Similarly, their involvement spans from acting as researchers carrying out adult-designed interviews (Baker *et al.* 1996) to deeper involvement in the development of research questions and interview schedules (see Alderson 1995, 2000; Jones 2004; Kellett *et al.* 2004; Kellett 2005; Warren 2000; West 1999). Such involvement recognizes children as social agents, cultural producers and experts of their own lives. It acknowledges that young people’s life worlds, their experiences of spaces and places differ from those of adults and that they are therefore “the best resource” for understanding youth (Corsaro 1997: 103; see also Kellett 2005). Including young people as researchers offers a genuine perspective into young people’s lives and supports the aim of minimising unequal power relations between adult researcher and young researched.

However, whether ‘empowerment’ can be achieved through the research process, and whether this should be a research aim at all, is debatable. Empirical work has shown that participatory approaches are often highly affected by funding priorities, personal and professional interests (Bowes 1996; Cooke & Kothari 2001a; Cornwall & Jewkes 1995), as well as gender-specific interests (Cornwall 1998). These interests, however, may not correspond with participants’ views or the socio-cultural context the research project is situated in (see Cornwall & Jewkes 1995). The researcher thus has to
acknowledge, that he/she may not ‘know what would be empowering for others” (Gore 1992: 63).

This means that participatory research can constitute and create new forms of domination resulting in exclusion and marginalisation (see Cleaver 2001, Cooke and Kothari 2001a; Cornwall 2003; Mohan 2001). Critical voices have even highlighted that “tyranny is both a real and potential consequence of participatory development” and argue that participation demands rethinking, if not abandonment (Cooke & Kothari 2001b: 3). This critique is based on the understanding that participation is an ‘unjustified’ (see Cooke & Kothari 2001b: 4) exercise of power. In this sense it is not surprising that the aim to ‘empower’ is sometimes interpreted as an ‘injection of power’ (Long & Long 1992: 275).

In line with these critiques, Harden et al. (2000) have pointed out that young people’s involvement in research does not automatically change the fact that one person is the interviewer and one is the interviewee. This could create new forms of power hierarchies which can, for example, position the child interviewer “between adult researchers and the child researched” (Harden et al. 2000: 2.19). Further, the matching of interviewers and interviewees by researchers according to pre-determined criteria may not necessarily facilitate a closer relationship in the interview (see also McDowell et al. 2005; Puwar 1997).

However, following Kesby (2005, 2007), we argue that acknowledging participation as a form of power should not lead to the abandonment of participatory research. Referring to Foucault’s understanding of power, Kesby (2005) argues that the discourses and practices constituting empowerment and participatory research are – like all social relations - embedded in and constitutive of particular material sites and spaces. Calling for a more coherent theorisation of spaces of participation Kesby argues that “while it [participatory space] is brought into being by performances that facilitate empowerment, relations constituted elsewhere may curtail empowered performances within it” (Kesby 2005: 2056). To facilitate sustained performances of empowerment it is essential to identify the different power relations that characterise people’s everyday spaces so that they can be re-performed within and beyond the participatory arena.

Empowerment through participation: methodological considerations
Academics who have involved young people as researchers (Alderson 1995, 2000; Baker et al. 1996; Kellett 2005a, 2005b; Kellett et al. 2004; Warren 2000, West 1999; [link to the website: http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk]) argue that training is necessary to achieve a meaningful involvement of young people in the production of useful data (Warren 2000).

We are sceptical, however, about the potential of the method to challenge ultimately young people’s subordinate societal position. Training young people to become professional researchers may, on the one hand, increase the likelihood that adults listen to them and take them more seriously (Pole et al. 1999, 51; see also Hill 2006; Wyness et al. 2004). It does, on the other, run the risk of becoming a token gesture (Hart 1997) that reinforces young people’s marginalization as adults define what is appropriate training and what is not.

Professional training implies a clear methodological understanding of what counts as acceptable academic knowledge. Considering that academics research young people’s lives mainly in a ‘narrow and conservative’ way (see Pole et al. 1999), such a professionalisation may run the risk of constraining young people from finding their own way of expressing their thoughts. Yet, ‘child-friendly’ methods contradict the post-modern construction of young people as competent social agents and neglects to acknowledge the heterogeneity of their lives (Christensen & James 2000; Punch 2002). It risks reducing them to a homogenised group of ‘others’. Thus, it “is not so much the methods and techniques employed, but the degree of engagement of participants within and beyond the research encounter” (Pain and Francis 2003:43) that matter.

The way adults construct and understand childhood and youth thus has a major impact on our understanding of the meaning of research and participation and on how we want young people to engage in research and political decision making. We have to be more critical about the methods we use to give young people a voice as “even methods that are defined as participatory can be disempowering and excluding for respondents if used with the wrong group, in the wrong situation or the wrong way” (Boyden and Ennew 1997, 83).

This does not mean that we are arguing against the training of young people. We value it as one way to equip young people with new skills and to give them more control over the project by sharing knowledge which may empower them. These skills may also be valued by policymakers or future employers (see McKendrick 1999). However, to avoid reproducing existing power hierarchies it is also necessary to
reflect on the specific needs, interests, fears and abilities of young people as well as the wider context and the power structures that characterise their everyday lives. In the following section it will be discussed how these critical considerations of young people’s involvement were addressed in the main author’s doctoral work with young people in rural east-Germany.

Developing a participatory research design: an empirical example

I now draw on examples from video-taped peer-interviews conducted by young people from two out of the nine groups (see Table 1). As no adults were present during these interviews, it was possible to examine how effectively participatory research methods provide a deep insight into the multiple power relations among young people and how these power-relations affect research.

The project was developed together with 65 young people in the age of 14 to 16 years in three small towns in rural east-Germany, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Schäfer, 2007). The research aimed to give a more detailed picture of the complexity of young people’s daily lives in rural east-Germany in the context of the severe social, economic and demographic recomposition that has characterised post-socialist restructuring (Fischer & Kück, 2004; Kröhnert et al, 2005). It aimed to elaborate how young people perceive and experience forms of social disadvantages using a participatory research approach.

These participants were contacted via different schools that represented the three levels of educational achievement of the German secondary school system. These schools were situated in three small towns in the South of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. All of the nine groups of young people received interview and data analysis training at the beginning of the project and over half of the participants conducted peer-led interviews. They were also given the opportunity to develop their own research projects.

I had to be aware that the idea of involving young people reflected firstly my academic understanding of participation and represented one of my aims for the research project. Acknowledging that young people’s agency is not only practiced in their decision to participate but is equally reflected in their decision not to get involved (see Hill 2006), I had to take into account that it was possible that none or

2 Hereafter ‘I’ refers to the corresponding author who conducted the empirical work.
only a small number of students would carry out the role of researcher, even after receiving training. It meant, however, that it was essential to enable, but not to predefine, young people’s involvement. I therefore decided to offer young people a combination of traditional and more innovative methods that they could make use of, according to their interests and needs. This meant that some young people engaged more actively in focus group discussions while others seemed to favour individual methods like drawings (of mental maps for example), writing, producing a collage on their daily lives. Other participants wanted to become researchers themselves. It has to be highlighted, however, that becoming involved as interviewers represented only one method young people could choose from and participating in the training session did not oblige them to take over actually the role of a researcher.

Teachers frequently asked me if they should put a group of students together which they thought would be the most appropriate to participate (mostly referring to the best or calmer pupils in class). To avoid such preselection (Matthews 2001b), I insisted on introducing myself and the project to the whole class so that young people could make an informed decision as to whether they wanted to participate. When young people decided to participate, I asked the teacher if these young people represented only the most dominant or interested ones in the class. Teachers were often surprised about the mix of the groups, indicating that this method included those who were normally very shy or not interested in joining in in-class discussions.

The actual research training session was divided into two main parts. First, a brief introduction to qualitative and quantitative research methods was given so that the participants could make informed decisions about the kinds of research methods they wanted to use. This part also included issues like protecting the rights of the researched, ensuring health and safety, dealing with unpredictable situations, planning for things that can go wrong and so on.

Secondly, an exercise was developed on how to design, prepare and conduct interviews about young people’s daily life. Here, differences among the groups occurred that reflected on power relations among young people. Some participants, for example, distanced themselves strongly from specific groups of young people and expressed that they did not want to include them in their own research projects. Other groups, however, did not identify these barriers and easily developed several strategies how to approach young people within their local environment. This offered important information about the networks young people were part of and their experiences of participation and negotiation of power as limits and opportunities of participation within and beyond the research were identified.
Furthermore, an introduction to technical equipment (laptop, digital recorder, microphone, video- and photo camera and tripod) was given. Participants had time for practical exercises so that they would feel confident and comfortable in using the equipment. Students got the chance to take over the role of the interviewer, the interviewee and the camera-operator to gain a more complex experience of the interview process and see the interview situation from different perspectives.

While this activity was developed in line with the recommendations for training sessions developed by scholars like Alderson (1995, 2000), Kellett (2005b) and Fraser et al. (2004), I want to emphasise that young people’s specific communication skills had a major effect on the way that it was conducted. Some students from lower educational levels, for example, identified follow-up questions and reacting flexibly to their interviewees as problematic. In these cases we concentrated much more on the preparation of the interview. We developed interview questions together, wrote them down as full sentences and also read them out several times before the actual interview. This was particularly important as some of these students had reading difficulties. Furthermore young people were given several chances to conduct interviews themselves so that they would get more comfortable doing it. It became clear that students with lower educational background and younger students needed more specific and personal feedback than students from higher educational levels or older students who were often more experienced with speaking freely through, for example, giving presentations in school.

Gender also played an important role, particularly in regard to the way young people made use of and familiarised themselves with the technical equipment. It was obvious that male participants often could not wait to try the video-camera out themselves and enjoyed practicing and experimenting with the equipment. In contrast to this, female participants took a less active role. Some girls even expressed their fear about ‘doing something wrong’ or breaking equipment. Thus, it was very important in the practical aspects of the training session to include everybody equally. It meant that participants who seemed to be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the technical equipment were given more time to familiarise themselves with it and more personal feedback to build up their confidence. However, it was often necessary to prevent male participants dominating the use of technical equipment, even at later stages of the research.

The training was not over in one session. The whole research project was rather understood as a ‘participatory arena’ (see Kesby 2005, 2007) which offered both multiple insights into the ways how research can be done and opportunities for
participants to try things out themselves. The first focus group discussion, which generally took place a week after the training session, was seen as another way to give young people an example of how discussions can be held. After we finished this first discussion I showed participants the thematic guideline I had prepared for the session. Students were often very surprised that we had not only discussed all or most of the topics on my list, but that this also had been done in the order of my guideline although “we were just chatting” (Marie aged 14). This insight into my preparation and way of working represented an important step to make the project transparent to students. It supported the aim of making young people more familiar with the role of the interviewer by taking me as an example. It demonstrated that I did not insist in claiming a right of the role of interviewer but was willing to share it with participants.

In the second and third focus group discussion I asked young people to choose and prepare their own topics of interest and encouraged them to conduct the interview without me (I would wait outside the room until I was asked to join the group again. I did not set any time restriction and peer-led interviews lasted between 5 and 45 minutes). That means that before young people started to develop their own research projects and to interview other young people (or adults) outside the group, they had the chance to familiarise themselves with the role of the interviewer. The focus group discussions thus opened up a safe space to try out and develop personal interview skills.

As training was given at the beginning of the project I was concerned that participants would mainly copy me and my way of interviewing. However, it became obvious that young people often already had a clear idea about the ways interviewers pose questions. Young people thus interviewed their peers in very different manner that ranged from the way teacher test their knowledge in school, to emulating the interview-styles of sports-reporter, show-hosts or TV presenters.

Young people’s motives to participate in the research project

The participants expressed a very high interest in the research training and it represented a key motive to participate in the research for many participants. I want to argue, however, that it was crucial to offer the research training without obliging young people to continue their participation in the project. In other words, the success of involving young people with such different backgrounds, abilities and interests was, at least partly, dependent on the fact that participants were not obliged to become interviewers themselves. For example, Anna (15), decided to attend the training only...
because I had emphasised that this would not be connected with any obligation to become an interviewer. However, nearly two months later, at the end of the project, Anna did the main work for a video project on young people’s everyday lives in her hometown for which she interviewed several adults and other peers on different topics. She had become much more confident during the research process and enjoyed practising the new skills she developed during the three months of research-participation. This example demonstrates that some students would not have participated if they would have been obliged to become researchers themselves. It indicates the risk to exclude less confident and shy young people from the research if the level and/or kind of participation is decided on a priori.

In addition to this it became clear that the training was appealing to students for four other reasons:

1. **Curiosity.** The whole project was different from normal leisure activities that were available to young people in the region. Although I am German, the project seemed to be very attractive to young people because it was funded by a British University. Young people perceived it as a sign of serious interest that somebody who was living in another country came to their region and even lived in their area to talk to them.

2. **Learning how to use the equipment** (video camera, photo camera, digital recorder and so on).

3. **Interest in the topic of the research.** Young people found the research project interesting because they felt that they were rarely asked about their thoughts, wishes and fears.

4. **Vocational preparation.** The training was also seen as a way to develop their communication skills and to gain more self-confidence. Robert (16) described it as follows: “I think this is pretty good training for future job-interviews. I think we should start as early as possible to train for this, don’t you think? And here we get pretty good feedback for it.” Each participant got a certificate in English and German at the end of the project which they could attach to future job applications.

It became obvious in the research process that gaining additional qualifications represented a major aspect of young people’s everyday life and thus a key motivation to participate in the project. After several weeks into the project young people and I therefore decided to organise a workshop for all participants that included career training. It demonstrates that young people’s motivations to partake in research are heavily influenced by their everyday life experiences.
In the following section I will focus on the multiple power relations among young people and how it affected the research process by analysing interview-excerpts from the peer-led interviews conducted by young people.

Peer-led interviewing and the negotiation of power

In the first example I want to refer to interviews conducted by students from a special needs school (Förderschule) that represents the lowest educational level in Germany. These young people are often referred to as problematic as they have learning and communicating difficulties. After the interview-training, participants from this school expressed the wish to interview other young people. They thus developed an interview guideline which contained both questions we had addressed in our discussions before (for example: What are your career aspirations?), and very specific questions that the pupils were eager to ask their peers (the boys for example wanted to ask students about their favourite cars while the girls wanted to know if the other students planned to have pets).

The following examples from these peer-led interviews show that interviewer Sebastian (15 years) had a specific understanding how his interviewees should respond to his questions and that he used different techniques to guide them through the interview. However, it will become clear that power relations were negotiable in the interview situation.

Sebastian conducted four interviews altogether, which lasted around five minutes each. Lars (15 years old) took over the role of his assistant and video-taped the interviews with permission. After having explained that everything was highly confidential and that participation was completely voluntary, Sebastian started with the interview. On the video-tapes it was apparent that he was mainly leaning over the guideline printout trying to read out the questions which often kept all his attention. The excerpt below shows how Sebastian formulated his questions, what kind of answers he got and how he reacted to the responses of his interviewees:

Example 1: Sebastian (15) interviewing Tim (9) and Jan (9)

1  Sebastian  What would you like to do when you grow up?
2  Tim        Tractor-driver.
3  Jan        Tractor-driver.
4  Sebastian  Do you think its fun?*
5  Tim        Yes.
6     Jan     Yes.
7     Sebastian  You shouldn’t always say the same!*  

* This marks additional follow-up questions that were not included in the original interview-guideline

This short extract already demonstrates some key characteristics of Sebastian’s interview style. Sebastian gets only very short answers that often do not even consist of a full sentence but of just one word. As both interviewees furthermore give the same reply, Sebastian includes a follow-up question (“Do you think its fun?”) with which he intends to give the boys the opportunity to explain in more detail why they want to become tractor-drivers. However, this question stimulates a yes/no response which does not motivate the interviewees to respond more fully. At this point Sebastian admonishes the boys to answer more accurately. This indicates that Sebastian has a specific understanding how his interviewees should respond and demonstrates how Sebastian makes use of the power of his position as interviewer. He sets out clear rules which his interviewees have to follow.

The short answers given by his interviewees can be understood as an outcome of this regulation, however, as becomes apparent in the video-analysis. The video shows that Sebastian points a finger at the person he wants to respond.

![Figure 1: Sebastian interviewing two boys aged 9](image)

As soon as one of the boys has given an answer Sebastian switches to the second interviewee, meaning that the boys are not given enough time to answer more fully. Sebastian is thus controlling not only who responds when, but also how long the response should be. Sebastian thus (unintentionally) restricted the responses of his interviewees.

While it can be said that Sebastian is in the more powerful position in this interview situation, it would be over-simplified to describe his interviewees as powerless. Tim and Jan rather find their own ways to counteract and thus challenge the power relation within the interview situation. This finds its expression for example when
they refuse to follow Sebastian’s *order* and remain silent or just give a very short response even though he keeps his finger pointed at them. This demonstrates that the role of the interviewer can be a means of asserting power but participants are in the position to challenge this claim as power relations are always the outcome of negotiation.

I probably do not have to point out how proud this group of students was about their performances as researchers. Their teachers were impressed that their students were able to conduct this project and how responsible and reliable the students proved to be. In a meeting with the head of school and the class teacher afterwards both expressed that they never thought that their students would have been able to do this on their own. The teacher concluded that they should probably be more confident in the abilities of their students. But it is important to remember that teachers work with different constraints and to different targets than I did in this research project.

*Second example*

The second example comes from a group of *Realschule* students, who attend secondary school leading to a degree that is comparable to the British GCSE. This group of young people consisted of eight boys and girls aged 16 and 17. After having attended the training session and the first focus group Christoph (aged 16) volunteered to prepare a topic for the following group discussion and to take over the role of the interviewer. Christoph did not want to make use of my offer to meet up beforehand to help him prepare the session, which is why we only had a brief informal chat just before the actual group discussion. Having chosen the topic of music and its meaning for people his age, Christoph had conducted a small survey within his class, asking class-mates what type of music they were listening to. He had worked out the percentages of how many students were listening to rock, pop and so on. His hypothesis was that boys and girls generally listened to very different kinds of music and he wanted to find out why this was the case. In order to answer this question he had devised a number of sub-questions. From my point of view Christoph was well prepared for the interview situation and I was impressed by the effort he had put into the preparation of the session.

At the focus group discussion (I left the room for the time that Christoph led it) Christoph presented his research results to the group as an incentive for the others to engage with the topic and to express their own thoughts about it. After Christoph finished introducing his results he addressed one student directly to get the discussion on the meaning of music for the group members started. The following excerpt of this
peer-led interview gives an insight into the different strategies Christoph used to engage his class mates in discussion:

1  Christoph  Anika, why are you for example listening to – you are mainly listening to rock music, right? Do you have any specific reason for that, do you connect it with a political statement?
2  Anika  No.
3  Christoph  No? Not at all? Are you listening to any other music?
4  Anika  I listen to a wide range of music.
5  Christoph  Wide range. But mainly rock?
6  Anika  Yes.
7  Christoph  OK. Karl, what is your opinion on the Böhse Onkelz\(^3\) [name of a German band]?
8  Karl  I like the music.
9  Christoph  Only the music? But what do you think about the lyrics?
10 Karl  Well, the lyrics tell you something about life, I would say.
11  Thomas  Which band?
12  Christoph  The Bösen Onkelz. Sebastian, so your favourite band is Die Ärzte [name of a German punk-band]?
13  Sebastian  Yes.
14  Christoph  (Repeating) YES? Oh my good. Do you have any reasons for that?
15  Sebastian  Because of the music.
16  Christoph  Mhm. (silence)
17  Nadja  I think the reason for all of us is because we just like the lyrics. (silence) Or do you connect it with a particular meaning?
18  Christoph  Well, I don’t know.
19  Nadja  See!
20  Robert  Yeah, but he can’t really say I listen to it because it is right-wing music, can he?
21  Nadja  Well, but that’s the truth, isn’t it?
22  Robert  Well, then I have to punch him (laughs).
23  Christoph  Why? That’s not a big deal, is it, if he listens to right-wing music. It doesn’t mean that he agrees with it.
24  Mike  And why are you listening to it then?
25  Christoph  Well, because I like the music, I mean, probably not so much the lyrics but the instrumental aspect.
26  Mike  Yeah, right.
27  Robert  That is absolute nonsense. It is as if I listen to music without voices.
28  Christoph  Yes, I (silent) I do not care about lyrics but (silent) but it is like rock music for me.
29  Robert  Yeah, and I listen to Jeanett Biedermann [German rock singer] and I love it because I do not care about lyrics. (laughs)
30  Christoph  (silent)
31  Nadja  Well, have you finished?

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\(^3\) **Böhse Onkelz** started as a German punk-band in 1980 and quickly gained a cult status in the right-wing scene. Although since 1986 the band officially took position against every kind of extremism including right-wing extremism their music is still often perceived in the context of right-wing radicalism. This also finds its expression in this interview, as the group refers to the *Bösen Onkelz* as a right-wing band.
Due to his insider-knowledge about the musical taste of his class-mates Christoph is in the position to address group members individually and ask them very precise questions. As Christoph gets only a very short reply from Anika even after posing a follow-up question he changes his strategy and engages somebody else (Karl) in the conversation (9). Contrary to Anika’s monotonous answers Karl reacts more actively. But before Christoph can respond to Karl’s description of what the song-texts mean to him Thomas interrupts the conversation (see 14). It seems as if this interruption has an irritating effect on Christoph as he moves on to include another member of the group (Sebastian) without any reference to Karl’s statement. This, however, results once again in a very short reply (17). Christoph gets obviously frustrated at this point as his attempts to stimulate a discussion among his class-mates do not seem to prove very successful. With the first signal of giving up, Christoph even becomes silent as if he ran out of questions (see 18-20). At this point it becomes obvious that Christoph does not know how to handle the situation and how to keep the conversation going. As Christoph is at a loss of how to continue his role as an interviewer, Nadja explains the group behaviour to him (21). She challenges Christoph in asking him what meaning he connects with the kind of music he is listening to. On the basis of his own understanding of and relationship to music Christoph is thus given another opportunity to engage everybody in the discussion. However, realising that he has lost control over the interview as he is now the one being asked, Christoph adopts a rather defensive manner, replying “Well, I don’t know” (23). From Nadja’s point of view this reply seems to prove that Christoph is not even clear what he is aiming for with all his questions. Nadja expects Christoph, as the interviewer of the session, to have a rationale for and understanding of the questions he poses. Otherwise, he does not qualify for the position of the interviewer. It means that Christoph’s position as the interviewer who moderates the discussion has been put into question by one interviewee.

At this point another member of the group, Robert, gets engaged in the discussion trying to explain – at least in parts - why Christoph gets only very short answers (25-26). Robert refers here to the specific kind of music Karl is listening to which the majority of the group connects with the right-wing-scene. Robert argues that Karl can not really speak his mind in the group as this political direction is – at least for Robert
Robert thus verbalises the underlying power-relations that characterise this group reflecting on the norms and values that affect the group communication. The fact that Robert sees the need to explain these underlying rules to Christoph demonstrate that he either does not perceive Christoph as a (full) member of the group (which would explain why Christoph does not know the rules) or that these rules have not been negotiated clearly enough before (which would mean that this topic has not been discussed before in the group, for example). Robert therewith refers to a kind of tacit agreement among the members of the group that have an impact on what is accepted and what is not. It refers to power relations that characterise the composition of the group. Not all members of the group, however, seem to share this understanding of these group norms (see Nadja 27). This can either refer to the fact that the participants of the focus group normally belong to different groups and thus have not developed their own group identity or that there is – at least from Nadja’s point of view – still space for negotiation of these group understandings. She questions Robert’s authority to claim for the existence of such rules. However, Robert gives Nadja a very clear response that he does not accept a breach of the rules arguing with his physical superiority (28).

At this point, Christoph enters the discussion again and questions Robert’s statement on the connection between listening to right-wing music and somebody’s own political attitude (29-30). It becomes clear, however, why Christoph intervenes at this point. Christoph is defending himself as well, as the group knows that he listens to right-wing music. However, Robert has already signalled that he will not accept any explanation, an understanding which is shared by Mike (31). There is no space for negotiation or reconciliation, as the group dominated by Robert denies Christoph the right to do so.

Getting impatient with Christoph’s silence, and thus his inability to fulfil the role of interviewer, Nadja calls on Christoph to bring the interview to an end (45). But before Christoph is able to fulfil this last task, Robert takes charge again, telling Christoph that he has not finished yet. This finally symbolises that Robert exposes Christoph as being incapable to fulfil his role as an interviewer. Christoph’s position within the group can be described as powerless as the others tell him what to do and how to do it. He finally gives in (47) officially resigning from his role of being the interviewer. Since he had prepared many more questions for the session, which he did not even mention in front of the group, it becomes clear that Christoph gives in under the pressure of the group (at that point I was called back into the room and we continued with the group discussion after Christoph had given a short summary of the topic discussed in my absence).
Despite this, the outcome of the interview can be described as a mayor achievement. After all, Christoph volunteered as the first of the group to prepare a topic of his interest for a discussion with his class-mates. He proved to the group and me in a very creative and enthusiastic way that he is able to prepare himself for the role of the interviewer by conducting a small case-study on young people’s favourite kinds of music prior to the actual interview and thus offered an interesting and original incentive to engage the group into the discussion. Furthermore, Christoph even managed to engage Robert, who can be described as the spokesman of the group, in the discussion and kept the interview going for a while. Since Christoph did not seem to belong to the group-leaders in the first focus-group, it is possible that the development of the interview matched his expectations. After the meeting was finished that day I stayed longer to talk to Christoph about his interview experience. He described briefly that nobody had really said much but that it was ‘ok’. He did not seem to be disappointed. We discussed several ways how to motivate participants to engage more actively in group discussions (see also Kellett 2005b) while I emphasised that even professional interviewers had to face these problems and that I was impressed by his preparations for the interview. Christoph seemed to have enjoyed the interview experience as it was obvious that he became more actively involved in the following group discussions.

The discussion on the meaning of music for young people’s political orientation gives an insight into the power relations young people are engaged in and the ways how they negotiate them. From an academic perspective, Christoph initiated a highly valuable focus group discussion as it captured “the inherently interactive and communicative nature of social action and social meanings, in ways that are inaccessible to research methods that take the individual as their basic unit of analysis” (Tonkiss 2004: 198). His interview thus gives an insight into what Barbour and Kitzinger (1999: 5) have described as the most beneficial outcome of focus group discussions: that they uncover “how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms”.

The excerpt demonstrates not only the existence of multiple power relations among young people but also the multiple ways through which these power are (re)produced, negotiated, and challenged within the research situation. Not to acknowledge these power relations among young people means to be blind towards the heterogeneity of young people’s lives. Neglecting this dimension of power relations would furthermore
restrict the empowering potential of the research as it would be unable to acknowledge and challenge power inequalities and forms of marginalization.

**Conclusion:**
In this paper we have argued that the emphasis on the unequal power relation between adult researchers and young researched has led to a negation of the multiple power relations between young people. This paper has highlighted the complexity and heterogeneity of young people’s lives by elaborating these relations. The empirical examples thus emphasise that young people are not a homogenous group of ‘others’ and that they resist, challenge, acknowledge or negotiate power amongst themselves.

It could be shown that such power relations affect not only young people’s everyday lives but also the research situation in multiple ways. To understand fully the participatory potential, as well as the limits and obstacles of facilitating participation and empowerment, it is necessary to take these power relations into account. Furthermore we highlighted that it is essential to reflect on our understanding of participation, as it might refer to a very narrow and conservative construction that does not correspond with young people’s needs and the contexts they are growing up in. It must be acknowledged that participatory research is not being distanced from power, which means that it can not only empower disadvantaged groups of people but also reproduce forms of marginalization and exclusion. Neither empowerment nor participation should thus be seen as inherent in a specific set of methods, but as the outcome of engagement and negotiation as well as knowledge-sharing and shared decision making.

Involving young people as researchers is a highly valuable approach that has the potential to acknowledge and highlight young people’s agency and thus to challenge inequalities between them. However, if this method is applied independently from young people’s needs and interests and the broader context they are living in this can turn into a research practice that structurally excludes groups of young people (see also Vandenbroeck and Bie 2006) and reproduces existing inequalities. It means that young people’s involvement in research as researchers should not be discussed as a new research paradigm as it would assume that this technique guarantees a solution to marginalisation and exclusion. This runs the risk of promoting a tyranny of the method (Cooke & Kothari 2001b) which disconnects research approaches and methods from the research context.
In this context we want to refer to Horton and Kraftl’s (2005) recent critical discussion of the emergence and use of the term ‘children’s geographies’. Contesting the assumption that geographers place themselves and their research in the service of children’s needs and interests, Horten and Kraftl (2005: 139 original emphasise) raise the question are “‘Children's Geographers' really so selfless and heroic?” This is an important question which prevents children’s geographies “becoming too much of a comfort zone” (ibid: 139). We want to highlight, however, that participatory research offers one opportunity to address critically and reflexively these concerns.

The specific implications for doing participatory research on and with young people is that access to them is often highly regulated through adult-gatekeepers (Balen et al. 2006; Harden et al. 2000; Matthews et al. 1998b) which means that issues of inclusion and representation need to be considered (even more) carefully. However, the need to acknowledge participation as a form of power and to work with these is not unique of the study of youth and childhood.

Furthermore, the call for greater political awareness and responsibility corresponds with wider debates in human geography on ethical aspects of conducting research and the position of the academic researcher (see Cloke 2002). Scholars in social geography are thus emphasising the need to uncover structures of marginalization and a stronger engagement with social inequalities (Kitchin & Hubbard 1999; Pain 2004; Pain & Francis 2003). In this context participatory research can offer a valuable approach (Boyden & Ennew 1997) to research marginalised others.

This project was set up to give young people a voice through developing a participatory arena. It is only apt to end this paper with some of their words about it:

“Well, I think it is great what we have achieved in this project. We really managed to talk about things that we are interested in and we could always say what we did not like.” (Katie, 16 years old)

“I really learned a lot in this project. About interviewing and using the video-camera. I really liked the work with the video camera.” (Johann, 14 years old)

“It was great that somebody was actually listening to us!” (Karen, 14 years old)

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