

World Café: a participatory research tool for the criminologist engaged in seeking world views for transformation

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Abstract

This paper introduces the creative participatory research methodology of 'World Café' in the context of our primary research on NPS (new psychoactive substances) usage within the youth and homeless population in Stoke-on-Trent in the UK. Our study involved conducting 6 World Cafes, with a total of 41 participants with homeless hostel service users (n=16), local college students (n=14) and professionals working with illegal drug users (n=11). We offer new pedagogical insight for a criminological research method that has the potential to be transformative. The 'World Café' is a conversational methodology that enables participants and researchers to get a 'world' view of issues and it lends itself for discussions pertaining to innovative solutions (Brown with Isaacs, 2005). A world view and innovative solutions can facilitate transformation at an individual level, as well as whole systems change in policy and practice. The role of the criminological researcher is to encourage participants to become active research assistants and our amended model combines this with undergraduate student researchers. Active engagement of research participants at a participatory level facilitates transformation of the research process in reducing power dynamics. We discuss the 'world café' approach and its transformative potential considering our first-hand experience of using the methodology to gather data on NPS drug usage.

Key Words

NPS, Drugs, World Café, Research Methods, Social Exclusion

Introduction

This paper aims to introduce a new approach to qualitative data collection for studying criminological topics that we suggest has transformative application. The approach, 'World Café', is hitherto not documented in criminology but is a conversational and

innovative methodological tactic to derive information from participants in a group setting (Brown with Issacs, 2005). We outline this method and consider its use to investigate NPS (New Psychoactive Substances) knowledge and user levels among homeless hostel service-users and colleges students from Stoke-on-Trent, in a study aimed at giving local policy makers insight into demand levels within the city, to inform service design that reduces drug related harm and associated crime. However, using innovative approaches to data collection is not without problems. This paper aims to reflect upon both the strengths and limitations of World Café in the context of our NPS research. We offer insights on how this method can be applied within the wider field of criminology.

Researching vulnerable groups in society on crime related topics has ethical sensitivities. Conversational approaches create a more informal atmosphere for generating data and potentially reduce power inequalities between academic researchers and participants. However, Bachman & Schutt (2017;p278) highlight that “the very act of research itself imposes something unnatural on the situation”. When barriers to inclusion are already an issue for a potential group of participants, criminological researchers need ethical, flexible and engaging methods to listen to people’s experiences and gain ideas for future improvement to individuals, services and society. Along with using World Café, we also invited student researchers to support us in generating data to further reduce power dynamics from influencing findings, and as a form of applied pedagogical practice that gave undergraduate students real world empirical experience.

The UK has opted for a blanket ban on all NPS through the British Psychoactive Substances Bill (2016) generating criminological critical analysis (Chatwin, 2017; Reuter & Pardo, 2017; Seddon, 2014; Stevens et al, 2015). Comparatively, the Netherlands and Portugal have embraced a harm reduction and normalisation policy approach (Chatwin, 2017;p112). Much criminological discussion of NPS has focused on how NPS challenges arise considering changing socio-economic, political, cultural and technological contexts. Less discussion has focused on the impact of NPS on local communities. Stoke-on-Trent, a former industrial city in the centre of England, has been highlighted in national press as the epicentre of a range of stories concerning NPS, particularly ‘monkey dust’ (Page, 2018). Yet there has been relatively little research on the impact of NPS use at a macro, community level to validate media reporting. Our research, conducted prior to media reporting, aimed to ascertain what was happening on the ground and what could be done to address any issues.

The World Café approach to data collection and our innovative research and pedagogy gives a unique localised but also pedagogically transformative approach of utilising undergraduate student researchers within the research process. We aim to describe our use of the World Café approach and its applicability to the wider field of criminology. We also share some of our findings on NPS and links to crime to show readers the quality of data that World Cafés can ascertain from participants and to provide our unique contribution to the NPS research field. This paper will not include an analysis of the

entirety of the data to enable us to focus on sharing methodological application and reflection.

Criminological Research Methods Explored

Existing examples of criminological qualitative research on NPS tends to be small scale and/or localised (see Blackburn & Bradley, 2017; Linnell et al, 2015; Ralphs et al, 2017; Addison et al, 2017). National data on NPS has only recently been obtained within the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). However, young people under the age of 16 and those who are homeless are not recorded in the crime survey (Gore, 1999; Broadfield, 2017). These groups have been highlighted as being more likely to use NPS (Addison et al, 2017; Ministry of Justice, 2015; Johnson et al, 2013; O'Neil, 2014). Alternative data collection is required to consult with these potential user groups, if demand issues are to more successfully addressed. Gore (1999: 575) asserts when looking at drug trends 'alternative surveys may need to be designed which target higher-risk sentinel groups, such as young people living in deprived areas, or young offenders' to get more reliable trend data. However, surveys may not be the best data capture tool when literacy levels of socially excluded groups are considered.

At local levels, research with young drug users has tended to take the form of questionnaires, interviews and focus groups (Simpson, 2003; Addison et al, 2017; Blackman & Bradley, 2017). Net-research liaising with people online has also been used to identify NPS trends (Bruneel et al, 2014). Completion of questionnaires and online approaches require respondents to be literate which excludes certain populations (Bryman, 2012). Online access is also an issue, although, Urbanik & Haggerty (2018) argue the digital divide has reduced with online interactions concerning drugs being more prevalent today. Ralph et al's (2017) NPS research with male adult prisoners in England used mixed methods, including interviews, focus groups and observations of workshop group discussions. These studies are examples of some of the research that has given useful insights into drug trends.

However, data collection and analysis in the drugs field has tended to be expert led. This means there is an overt power difference between academic researcher and the socially excluded and/or young participant. Surveys reduce interviewer effects, but the data can lack rich contextual information from further probing (Bryman, 2012). One-to-one data capture does not allow for creative processes of group problem solving, which provides opportunity for testing out ideas. Interviews and focus groups enable richer data but have a formal feel to them. Interviewers tend to have more power than the participant (Mishler, 1986; Ellis & Berger, 2003; Dingwall, 1997; Kvale, 1996). If a participant has had a negative experience from being interviewed by police, probation and other professionals, this may impact upon how they experience being interviewed one-to-one or in a group with academic professionals. So, it is important to explore more informal options for generating data that reduce power imbalance and negative associations.

Focus groups are thought to be less directed by the researcher than interviews (Bryman, 2012). However, it is recommended not to exceed 12 participants in a focus group (Noaks & Wincup, 2004) and there are occasions when larger group gatherings are and cost-effective for capturing data.

Reflections on Co-produced Research and Using World Café

World Café offers an alternative data collection methodology using group discussion in a face-to-face environment (Brown with Issacs, 2005). In this section we attempt to reflect on applying World Café with vulnerable groups in society on their understanding and consumption levels of NPS and give some examples of the ethical and data issues experienced.

In the mid-1990s academics and business leaders developed the World Café dialogue approach, a type of participant-led group-discussion (Brown and Isaacs 2005; Aldred, 2009). People with collective interest on an issue engage in several rounds of dialogue with others in a café environment (Dawkins, 2017; Finch et al, 2014). It is helpful to visualise this as multiple focus groups, simultaneously occurring, in the same venue, where participants can rotate and join other groups' conversations with refreshments on offer. Engaging in these exchanges transforms individual knowledge and experiences into collective intelligence and decision making, and allows for innovative possibilities to emerge (Prewitt, 2011: 4; Khong et al, 2017: 181).

We have amended the World Café approach to facilitate co-produced research with undergraduate and alumni students, alongside partners on this project from Public Health, who hold an important role in addressing NPS usage in the UK according to Ayres & Bond (2012). The Stoke-on-Trent public health team lead for commissioning drugs and alcohol services highlighted the need for this research and worked with us to design and scope the project with the agreement that findings would inform feasible action and adjustments to service provision. Reinharz (1992) highlights the importance of research that leads to social change and ensuring policy-relevant organisations and policymakers are connected to research. This is a skill set that students get to learn by being involved in professional research with us. Our 'academic collaborative model' allows for collaborative practice with an academic staff research lead, guiding the process and role modelling partnership working. Boville et al (2016: 199) point out there is "personal and professional risk" involved with academics co-researching with students, which can be managed by research focusing on issues within HE (Maunder et al, 2013; Little, 2011; Dunne et al, 2011). We extend this further, by enabling students to work with organisations outside of the university on wider agendas.

Our research team decided to use World Café due to consideration to potential participants and how they might benefit from the informal data collection atmosphere. Furthermore, World Café offers a cost-effective mechanism to capture data from a wide

range of people, which accommodated our small research grant. We envisaged that we would host approximately 20 participants at each of the six World Café events that we had planned (2 for college students; 3 for homeless hostel-users; 1 for professionals from addictions and community safety field of work).

Our 'purposive sample' (Ritchie et al, 2014: 173) aimed to capture data from a portion of the groups of people that current NPS research indicates prevalence among (Ministry of Justice, 2015; Johnson et al, 2013; O'Neil, 2014; Addison et al, 2017; Blackburn & Bradley, 2017). We hoped our sample of college students and homeless hostel users would give us useful local insight into NPS user levels and knowledge. We would then be able to check findings with professionals in the field to gain further perspectives and a more holistic viewpoint. It was felt these specific populations would be able to generate innovative solutions to problems for future drug service delivery. Forty-one male and female participants aged 16 years and above took part: 14 college students, 16 homeless hostel-users and 11 professionals from various organisations (including health, police and drug services). Data collection took place between mid-April and September 2016 to coincide with the period shortly before and after the introduction of The Psychoactive Substance Act of 2016. While a respectable sample size for a qualitative study, the numbers fell short of what we aimed for (Finch et al, 2014: 236) and had repercussions for World Café delivery and data quality.

Each of the six World Café events lasted between 60-90 minutes (depending on numbers present). The venue was arranged like a café with chairs around tables covered with multiple paper tablecloths (one tablecloth per discussion theme), felt-tip pens, refreshments, and a menu highlighting the event order and research materials, such as information sheets and consent forms (MacFarlane et al, 2017; Ritch & Brennan, 2010; Burke & Sheldon 2010). Participants sat around tables and listened to a short presentation about NPS terms, effects and the law to stimulate thinking. This was followed by an outline of the World Café procedure and their rights as a participant. Informed consent was gained. The presenter, acting as café host, facilitated the whole café experience, supporting the research assistants, managing time and participant movement. The host was able to observe student research practice and give feedback for further improvement in debrief sessions.

After the initial presentation and gaining of informed consent, participants responded to a discussion theme, answering a small range of questions for 15 minutes. The nominated table 'scribe' created a written record of group members' contributions on the tablecloth (MacFarlane et al, 2017: 282). For this study, our student research assistants and ourselves (when appropriate) scribed to reduce barriers to participation based on literacy levels. However, the general approach is participatory, so participants are scribes and offered the opportunity to be 'table host'. Several participants from each table are then invited to move to another table (Aldred, 2009). The 'table host' remains and summarises previous group's discussion to incoming participants. Newcomers share highlights from discussions at their former table and any new data is captured on the

tablecloths (Ritch & Brennan 2010: 406). The second conversation lasts approximately 10-15 minutes, followed by a third rotation if the host thought it would produce further productive discussion (Chang & Chen, 2015). A spokesperson from each table presents an account of the collective group's responses to all other café participants in turn, highlighting similarities and unique contributions, which creates a 'world view'. This cycle is repeated for each new discussion theme.

At the close of each of our World Cafés, participants were invited to complete a short questionnaire allowing the option to privately disclose any personal usage of NPS and related experiences (Simmons, 2001: 86). Our student research assistants were available to support questionnaire completion. The questionnaire is not part of the World Café approach but helped manage ethical issues around disclosure and ensuring everyone was given the opportunity to contribute (MacFarlane et al, 2017). The aim was to reduce what Garner & Sercomb (2009: 81) refer to as issues that emerge through "social relations". The questionnaire also enabled us to get feedback on their experience of the World Café.

Careful consideration was given to ethical issues (e.g. vulnerability and participants' age). College lecturers secured parental consent for students to participate and hostel staff were perceived as 'guardians' for under-18s homeless participants (given reliance on temporary accommodation, rather than residence within the family home). Hostel management took responsibility for informing and recruiting suitable participants and providing us with a venue. All researchers secured DBS checks as a safeguarding measure. Informed consent was gained at the beginning of each event and participants were assured they could withdraw at any point. Details of drug services were shared with participants should they require a referral via leaflets and debrief sheet. Concerningly, few participants were aware of existing local drug support services which highlighted an area of service improvement.

Homeless hostel-users can be evicted for using drugs, including NPS. To reduce this impacting upon self-disclosure, pre-agreements were put in place with hostels that accommodation would not be affected by information shared. This was explained to participants at each event. However, all student participants and most homeless-hostel participants claimed they had not used NPS, despite research suggesting these groups are more likely NPS users (Ministry of Justice, 2015; Johnson et al, 2013; O'Neil, 2014; Addison et al, 2017; Blackburn & Bradley, 2017). Student participants reported either not knowing anyone using NPS, or that only "10-20%" of their peers used NPS, which is in line with USA findings from Stogner & Miller (2013), but challenges existing literature in the UK. CSEW data indicates young men aged 16-24 years are the most prevalent users (Broadfield, 2017). Our student sample was mostly female (F=11, M=3), meaning that gender bias could have influenced findings and this is an area for further investigation. Some homeless hostel participants mentioned experimenting with NPS; two reported using daily and all estimated up to "85%" of their peers using NPS, with comments like "people on the streets, a lot of them do it". Our findings corroborate with existing literature on NPS being prevalent among the homeless (Blackman & Bradley, 2017;

Addison et al, 2017). Homeless hostel-users were also largely unaware that NPS was illegal in the UK and knowledge about NPS effects were low. A need for more thorough NPS drugs education was apparent.

Based on contact with drug users, our professional participants claimed NPS users tended to be 'vulnerable' (including 'homeless', 'rough sleepers', people with 'mental health' issues, 'street drinkers' and '*C.S.E. victims'). Professionals also recorded that 'existing drug users', were using NPS with an estimation that '75-80% use NPS in combination with other drugs'. This links to the suggestion that NPS is part of a poly-drug scene in the UK (Blackman & Bradley, 2017: 70). Our professional participants also thought that NPS was being used recreationally, but that 'Weekend users [were] inadvertently using NPS thinking it's something else'. Our findings indicate that NPS has not necessarily overtly recruited new drug users, but that existing drug users within this participant cohort are more likely to be using NPS. Polydrug usage also leads us to question whether associated negative effects and behaviours are due to NPS, or from the combination of chemicals from polydrug usage.

We had worked on strategies to safeguard participants should they disclose NPS usage. Our World Café questions had been designed to be non-intrusive, so participants felt no obligation to self-disclose. However, we had not fully considered support for participants who may have been victims of serious crimes associated with NPS, as this was not the focus of our research. One of our participants disclosed how they had taken 'mamba' (a street name for one NPS product) and this had resulted in them not being able to 'move', before being 'gang raped'. This participant went on to talk about how this had impacted upon accommodation stability and the development of mental health problems. The researcher working with this participant indicated for support from the café host (presenter), who had extensive experience working therapeutically with drug users and was able to ensure emotional well-being of the participant, ascertaining that suitable support services and networks were being accessed. This practice is akin to recommendations by Bachmann & Schutt (2017: 279) for debriefing participants to ensure emotional well-being. The World Café where this disclosure occurred had low attendance and it is unlikely that the participant would have disclosed in a larger group context. This is something to be mindful of when using World Café; it has the potential to silence the telling of certain stories (Prewitt, 2011: 5).

Participants from homeless hostel accommodation reported that NPS users were engaged in crime and said that they were aware of 'loads of begging', 'shop lifting', 'dealing' and 'fighting'. These crimes link to associations between drugs and acquisitive crime (Seddon, 2006; Seddon et al, 2008). As also cited in Page (2018), one of our participants confessed being charged for 'breach of the peace' by the police after taking 'monkey dust' (another NPS product) and 'arguing with a garden gnome 9pm-3am'. It was also felt that there were connections between taking NPS and 'domestic violence, criminal damage, assault, murder, debt, theft and debt from buying the drugs' as well as 'knife and gun violence'. Here, associated crimes seem quite wide ranging and largely based on

observations of friends that were using NPS and assumptions about NPS users. Several hostel accommodation participants commented that 'they all know someone who has been attacked' and assaulted by 'mamba' users.

Since our data collection, we are aware of further research that connects NPS usage to aggression and violence (Addison et al, 2017). Appropriate referrals for victims of crime is important for ethical practice for future research in this field. Interactions with local NPS users led professional participants to express knowledge of a range of negative health effects associated with NPS, including: 'paralysis', 'seizures', 'skin problems from IV drug use e.g. from monkey dust', 'sores' and 'hallucinations' and users had displayed 'violent behaviour', 'unpredictable behaviour' and were 'unaware of surroundings'. The more tranquillizing effect of paralysis reported by professionals corresponds with what our homeless hostel participants reported. Whilst we had made provisions to support people based on their own drug usage and associated health concerns, as well as provision for those concerned over someone else's drug usage, we had not made explicit referral routes for participants who may have been victim to crimes associated with NPS.

Using World Café in Criminological Research: Methodological Reflections

Using innovative approaches such as World Café to generate data is not without problems. Sufficient numbers (approx. 15-20 people) per café are needed to successfully generate productive group discussions and allow for rotations that lead to 'cross-pollination' of ideas (Ritch & Brennan, 2010). Due to insufficient numbers at our events, we were unable to successfully deliver three of the six planned events and had to adapt our approach to collect participants' experiences. Poor attendance was attributed to various factors. One of our cafés, was scheduled during college students' revision leave and one student attended, instead of the anticipated large group. We improvised with an in-depth interview. Poor attendance at two events in hostels was a result of various factors. In one hostel, the manager had not informed participants about the research and went on to tell hostel staff, without consulting us, to round up hostel-users, waking them up and disrupting daily routines of showers and breakfast. Hostel-users were told participation was mandatory, so we spent time explaining to agitated and angry hostel-users that participation was voluntary. Several residents helped themselves to our refreshments while they deliberated over participating, then promptly left. Others remained but struggled with moving around to the different tables for the discussion. So, we reduced the rotations accordingly.

In another hostel, poor communication about the event from staff to hostel-users was again apparent. We suspected that a hostel-user was actively discouraging others from participating in our event. That session ended up running more like a research drop-in service, rather than a structured, yet informal World Café event. Our amended research drop-in service approach resulted in going through the presentation information on a one-to-one basis and then conducting interviews, but still using the tablecloth to record

findings. The issues we encountered enabled our student research assistants to gain first-hand knowledge of how researchers need to be flexible and spontaneous to respond to issues as and when they arise, and how to manage the complexity of real-world research.

When the World Cafés worked, we observed that they have the capacity to stimulate rich, animated and productive exchanges. Reviewing the tablecloth records after the event, depth of vibrant conversations can be less apparent, with mostly bullet-points, single words and sentences reflecting discussions, which leaves the researcher to interpret what was meant (MacFarlane et al, 2017). Where our research assistants acted as 'scribes', more detailed accounts of conversations could be captured with direct quotes and reconstructions. Research assistants were involved in typing up the table cloth notes. Our research budget had dissolved by the time we got to the professionals' World Café and we assumed that they were experienced at attending work-related meetings where they needed to take notes and contribute simultaneously, so we utilised the participatory approach of inviting them to scribe and table host. Some table hosts captured lots of data and others very little. When café events are used, consideration needs to be given to who the participants are, their skill-set and the amount of depth wanted from the tablecloth conversations. While World Café data appears less rich and detailed in comparison to in-depth interview or focus group data, it is generally more detailed than survey data. Bryman (2012) reports that even audio-recorded focus group data is a challenge to decipher and not everyone participates equally. So, however data is recorded there are strengths and limitations.

These practical issues aside, we endorse this novel method and encourage criminologists and sociologists to add it to their research toolkit. Used carefully, this technique has the potential to flexibly lend itself to the study of other criminological topics where focus groups are often preferred and the default option. As part of the questionnaire used at the end of the World Café, we asked participants for feedback on the event. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse this data, in summary, participants enjoyed taking part in the World Cafés and said they learnt new things about NPS. Our personal reflections are that it offers an energetic, dynamic and passionate form of inquiry. Since completing the NPS study, we have gone on to use World Café in a variety of other studies including; eliciting feedback from professionals on impact from research findings from a domestic violence and perpetrators of domestic abuse study; exploring people's views about the practicalities of delivering domestic abuse prevention education in schools; improving educational materials being used in a domestic abuse education prevention programme; and eliciting views and ideas about creating a breastfeeding culture change from young people and professionals within the sociology of health sphere. We are also presently working with external organisations in developing research projects using World Café to explore the attitudes towards race hate crime and extremism as well as to evaluate a community arts prison program. In our links with external partners over recent months we discovered that the Prison service is being encouraged to use World Café to consult with inmates and staff for improvement purposes (Revolving Doors Agency, 2016). As a follow up to this study, a staff and student academic partnership in

collaboration with public health is in the planning stages of using World Café to explore how NPS usage impacts upon local communities.

Conclusion

The 'Academic Collaborative Team Model' we developed offers students employer connections and professional skills, as well as opportunity to conduct meaningful research that in this project influenced positive service level changes. It takes students out of the university and gives them knowledge from the real world and connects the two in a research experience. Further research is required to demonstrate the transformative impact of utilising undergraduate student researchers in professional research with external agencies.

World Café, and utilising undergraduate student researchers within this approach, has a potentially wider benefit to the field of criminology. This innovative methodological approach to derive information from participants in a group setting and ascertain creative solutions provides an engaging and informal data collection method (Brown and Issacs, 2005). Our experience of using it in a range of criminological and sociological projects comes with reflections on limitations, particularly regarding data quality (if research assistants are not utilised as scribes) and the need to use a flexible approach if fewer participants turn up to a World Café event than scheduled. We also acknowledge that group discussion approaches to data collection are less desirable for gaining insight into sensitive topics where personal disclosure is a form of evidence. However, we believe that the strengths outweigh the problems that we have experienced when applying World Café methodology. In particular we suggest that a World Café approach has truly transformative potential through a) people gaining a more nuanced world view at data collection events on a given topic; b) transformation via a more democratic approach to data collection that informs policy and practice as findings create real time change and c) using undergraduate researchers in the research process can transform their confidence, employability and research skillset. When World Cafés work, we observe they have capacity to stimulate rich, animated and productive exchanges, which transforms individual knowledge and experiences into collective intelligence, decision making and allows for innovative possibilities to emerge (Prewitt, 2011: 4; Khong et al, 2017: 181).

In terms of research findings, we noted low levels of NPS usage and associated drug knowledge, inclusive of legislation, among college students. However, information shared by homeless hostel users about peers who were using NPS gave evidence for links between NPS with problematic behavior, acquisitive crime and violence. There needs to be more research into the links between crime and NPS usage and NPS users, along with the effects of different NPS substances inclusive of the interplay with mental health and poly-drug usage. Whilst this research aimed to add knowledge to the field, it does not systematically address all under-researched areas and it is beyond the scope of this paper

to report and offer analysis on all findings. We would advocate using World Cafés to address research gaps, where group discussion is appropriate to the topic.

The research methodology used in this study is novel to criminology and has significant contributions to make to advancing the researchers' toolkit into a more contemporary, informal participatory approach. This is particularly important for research participants who may have had negative experiences within the criminal justice system of interviewing and form-filling, which traditional criminological qualitative research methods unintentionally often reflect. We argue that the World Café approach has advantages over focus groups and interviews in terms of capacity to reduce power imbalances and manage possible former negative associations encountered with interactions with professionals. World Café also allows the researcher to undertake data collection with large sample sizes that can be cost-effective and can still lead to stimulating data. Data collection and analysis about NPS drugs has tended to be expert-led, so participatory approaches offer the opportunity to reduce power dynamics and this can be further achieved by utilising undergraduate students as active researchers in the data collection process.

Our participants identified practical solutions to better support NPS users and prevent NPS usage in the city, which could be applied elsewhere, with the main recommendations for better NPS drugs education and harm reduction information at a preventative level, and as cited in Page (2018), "on-site drop-in services" for drug support at homeless hostels. We also advocate for better communication and marketing of existing drug services in cities to vulnerable groups. Detailed recommendations have been presented to local policymakers and as such, our World Cafés offered both our participants and our undergraduates the opportunity to become catalysts for change in reducing crime and anti-social behavior through informing service design that reduces drug related harm and associated crime.

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