

Appendix 11b

**Exploring Reliable Techniques for
Researching Sensitive Topics with
Young People:
an Example from Research into
Stigma of Mental Health within
Mainstream Schools**

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Background and Context

My practice:

- ❖ Teacher in a school attached to an adolescent psychiatric unit
- ❖ Leader of Access, Participation and Inclusion, within this multidisciplinary organisation, supporting young people return to the mainstream education system.

My experiences:

Many pupils believe that on return to a mainstream school disclosure of having been a patient in a psychiatric hospital will evoke stigmatising attitudes from their mainstream peers and they will not be accepted.

'They'll think I'm weird,'
'They'll think I'm mental,'

The literature:

Stigma of mental health may be reflected in the language (Rasinski et al 2005, Pilgrim 2005, Corrigan 2005, Hinshaw 2007)


'Labelling Theory' (Scheff 1984)

'Linguistic Category Model'
(Semin & Fiedler 1988)

'Linguistic Intergroup Bias'
(Maass et al 1995 & 1989).

Research Questions

- ❖ What are young peoples' understandings of mental health problems?
- ❖ Are stigmatising attitudes present in mainstream schools?
- ❖ How can the findings be effectively employed within the transition process?



How would I engage young people in mainstream schools to 'talk' about the sensitive subject of mental health?

Research Processes (Crotty 1988)

epistemology

social constructionism (Burr 2003, Gergen & Gergen 2003)

theoretical perspective

personal constructs (Burr 2003)

symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969)

methodology

pragmatism (Howe 1988)

mixed qualitative and quantitative

(Gorard & Taylor 2004, Brewer & Hunter 2006, Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998)

methods/techniques

questionnaire (booklet/comic):

cartoons and captions (Maass et al 1989)

vignettes

(Corrigan et al 2005, Wilks 2004, Barter & Renold 2000, Link et al 1987)

social distance scales (Link et al 1987)

familiarity scales (Corrigan et al 2005)

language

(Rasinski et al 2005, Pilgrim 2005, Maass et al 1989 Semin & Fiedler 1988)

semi-structured interviews:


individual and group

Ethical Issues

- ❖ Would I be perpetuating the stigmatised stereotype by carrying out my research? (Green et al 2003, Hurd 1998)
- ❖ How could I design the questionnaire without offending participants?
- ❖ Who could I approach and how?
- ❖ How would I edit the data? (Mason 2002)


Main Sample

I presented the questionnaire to Year 10 pupils from mixed ability and gender form groups in three mainstream schools, within different social areas. I collected data from eighty nine pupils...



Concerned the questionnaire alone might not provide sufficiently rich data I explored the young peoples' responses further by running parallel interviews with a smaller sub-sample.

Pupils were selected for interview on the basis of their responses to the questionnaire...



The ten individual and one group **interviews** enabled the young people to name, define and contextualise personal experiences of mental health problems and how they may have informed their beliefs.

Findings So Far

Questionnaires:

- ❖ reflect considerable variability in young peoples' opinions and reactions towards mental health problems
- ❖ indicate lack of ownership of certain language which, they may perceive is going to be disapproved of.

Interviews:

- ❖ showed a considerable variability in the understanding of and attitudes towards mental health and, personal experiences
- ❖ uncovered a lack of language with which to articulate their understandings.

Comparison:

Are there anomalies between the two data sets or can each set inform the other at the stage of interpretation?

Potential Original Contribution

The important dimension of originality in my work lies in the understanding of how young people engage ('talk about') with the sensitive topic of mental health in an educational setting.