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Young People's Emotional and Sensory Experiences of 'Getting By' in Challenging Circumstances

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Introduction

Influenced by legal conceptions and institutional approaches, much literature on difficult family circumstances has focused on identifying the abuse and neglect suffered, and potential 'outcomes' for children and young people, including the risks that such experiences may pose for their future lives. This chapter, in contrast, highlights the importance of examining children's and young people's understandings and lived experience of such phenomena. As Newman (2002) argues, the meanings that children themselves attach to adversity are important, and these understandings may vary between children and adults. Work in geography, sociology and other disciplines associated with childhood studies, and the innovative methods they employ, may help to develop such understandings. Such work includes explorations of children's autonomy in different spaces, and the importance of the everyday sensory, embodied and affective dimensions of children's and young people's spatial experience and place-making. This work also rejoins recent considerations of children's emotional geographies (Blazek and Windram-Geddes, 2013).

This chapter discusses these issues in relation to two studies of children and young people's experiences of parental substance misuse, an issue that has attracted increasing attention in many countries (NCASA, 1999; ACMD, 2003; ANCD, 2006), and which has been estimated to affect two million young people in the UK (Manning et al., 2009). After a short background section on relevant theoretical work, and an introduction to the studies discussed, this chapter will present empirical findings on how sensory experience can inform the meaning of, and emotions in, domestic spaces in such circumstances, as well as implications for practice.

Parent substance misuse and constructing home in two studies of parental substance misuse

A focus on risk and pathology has characterised much research into parental substance misuse. The *Hidden Harm* report published by the UK Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (2003) reflected and further inspired a growing body of work that has sought to map the impact of parental substance misuse (drugs and/or alcohol) on the lives of children and young people (Velleman and Orford, 1999; Kroll and Taylor, 2003; Barnard and McKeganey, 2004; ACMD, 2007; Velleman and Templeton, 2007). This research has linked parents' problematic substance use with negative outcomes, including household instability, child neglect, compromised childcare and safety, detached parent–child relationships, and, in turn, 'problem' behaviours and psychological harm among affected children. Cuijpers et al. (1999) emphasise that children of substance misusers are at risk of developing serious emotional problems themselves later in life. Drawing on psychological theories of emotional development, social workers Kroll and Taylor's interviews with young children led them to conclude that 'for most children living with chronic substance-misusing parents, life can be very painful, difficult, frightening or dangerous' (2003, p. 298). The studies discussed in this chapter drew on this important work but focused more on family interactions, attempting to develop an understanding of how children themselves understand their home lives to be affected in the moment, and how they might attempt to 'get by' (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008) in such circumstances.

In developing this work, these studies drew on a range of recent work in childhood studies. This work included explorations of children's constructions of their 'places' (Morrow, 2001; Rasmussen, 2004), including more 'inaccessible private places' (Nieuwenhuys, 2003, p. 99). Some of this work has, for example, identified generational and gendered power dynamics affecting their use of different parts of the home (McRobbie and Garber, 1976), as well as complex interrelationships between young people's use of home and public spaces (Matthews et al., 2000; Skelton, 2000).

Particularly important to the analysis in this chapter, however, was recent theoretical and methodological work highlighting the importance of exploring sensory and intangible experience. As Mason and Davies argue, 'too often social science research and knowledge is oddly abstracted and distanced from the sensory, embodied and lived conditions of existence that it seeks to explain' (2010, p. 600). In relation to space, Horton and Kraftl highlight that 'spaces matter, in many more ways than the rather blank, neutral, calm, and lifeless sense of their common usage' (2006, p. 270).

Certain spaces matter particularly. As Mallett (2004, p. 84) argues, the home is 'normally' associated with intimacy, privacy, comfort and a sense of belonging, and the lack of these can 'create a sense of marginalisation and estrangement'. Some of the research above highlighted how at certain times of the day young people can feel pushed out of common areas of overcrowded homes. Further, recent research has indicated that in circumstances of parental mental ill-health (Fjune et al., 2009) and domestic abuse (Overlien and Hydén, 2009) children may sometimes feel uncomfortable and unsafe in one part of a house and take refuge elsewhere, often in a bedroom. Older children may seek refuge away from the home. Notably, Skelton (2000) observed how young women from overcrowded homes sought to privatise semi-public spaces elsewhere.

Such 'place-making' (Svensson et al., 2009), or attempts to transform or substitute for particular places, reflects children's agency, however constrained. Indeed, childhood studies scholars have questioned a perceived overemphasis on agency in the new social studies of childhood, given the constraints on many children's lives (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). Here, as noted, such strategies are approached in terms of young people trying to 'get by' (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008) in challenging home circumstances, negotiating their parents' difficulties in particular places at particular times. It was clear that these strategies of 'getting by' were not without emotional cost, and were often contingent on fragile relationships. The importance of practitioners supporting such is also considered in this chapter.

The work presented above provided some of the inspiration for, but also reflects the analysis of, two projects on which the author worked, which explored children's experiences of parental substance misuse. Most participants were still living with a parent or had done so recently. Both sets of interviews focused on home experience and family interactions, and the effects of parental substance misuse. Other questions addressed their relationships with social workers and other practitioners. The first of these projects (Bancroft et al., 2004), commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), involved interviews with 38 young people, aged 15–17, 20 women and 18 men, recruited in a variety of settings across mainland Scotland, including community drug agencies, youth groups and young carers' organisations as well as further and higher education institutes between 2002 and 2004. Semi-structured interviews were supported by a 'life-grid' (Wilson et al., 2007), a visual method that allowed the construction of a retrospective picture of the respondent's life in order to situate the role of parental substance use within it.

The second study was the 'Family Life Project' (FLP) (Houmøller et al., 2011), a 30-month interview-based qualitative study of the family lives of young people affected by parental substance use commissioned by the Department of Health of England and Wales. Fifty young people aged 10–18 (30 female, 20 male) were recruited through six social support agencies in five different areas of the south east and Midlands of England between 2008 and 2010. Sixteen respondents were interviewed several times and also nominated 'significant others' (a group which included parents, grandparents, friends, project workers and teachers) for further interviews. A separate sample of parents who were former and current injection drug users was also interviewed (Rhodes et al., 2010). The study employed face-to-face interviewing alongside some interactive and visual tools, including drawing. Building on the literatures above and the first study discussed here, the issue of space, in the sense of where the respondents had lived over time and how they had used different spaces within the home and elsewhere, influenced the research design.

The next sections will draw on empirical findings from these studies. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and the studies are distinguished by the labels 'JRF' and 'FLP'. The empirical findings presented will focus on the respondents' lack of control over their use of home space, their sensory and emotional experiences of and in these spaces, and their place-making strategies, as well as the fragility of the material and emotional resources available.

Participants' sensory and emotional experience of parental substance misuse

Respondents' lack of control over home space

The project data confirmed the findings of previous studies which identified that young people, especially those living in overcrowded accommodation, can feel pushed out of common spaces by parents. For the JRF and FLP respondents, these feelings were reinforced by the sense that parents wanted to conceal their substance use, in visual terms at least, by making sure they were not present in a room where drug use was taking place.

> But eh … right up till I was 14 I was never really in the room or I was kept, ken, through in the bedroom. You're chased, you're chased through, ken. (Sean, JRF, 21, mother and two stepfathers drug use)

> Sometimes they're upstairs together and I don't know what they're doing? [So I] go in there and peek around the corner … sometimes my dad pushes me out of the room but I don't know why. (Abigail, FLP, 10, both parents drug use)

Other respondents' parents tried to ensure that they spent much of their time away from the home. Emily (FLP, 13, both parents drug use) spoke of her mother's constant encouragement to attend events outside the house, and to take her younger sister with her. For Emily, being pushed out of the house increased her fears that her parents had relapsed into drug use while also reinforcing her feelings of frustration at having nowhere she could relax and just 'be'. These feelings were reinforced by the fact that she had little time to herself, as she often had to keep an eye on her little sister.

As a result, many respondents' homes were presented as places of tension and unpredictability rather than as any kind of 'haven'. As such, they reflected some aspects of important feminist work on domestic abuse (Mallett, 2004). Spending time at friends' houses, observing their friends' families and their everyday rituals, often reinforced an acute and isolating sense that their homes were not 'normal', that friends should not be invited there if their potentially discrediting nature were not to be revealed, while for others, home life had been completely discredited:

> It's embarrassing because all your friends have got normal parents and you haven't … knowing that like, you're not going to have a birthday party or you can't invite your mate around for dinner because it's just, it's not appropriate and their parents won't let them. It's horrible, it really is. (Sally, FLP, 18, mother drug use)

The following account from Kate is unusual. She did have a friend she could invite home because that friend had experienced similar issues. However, even in this case, complete relaxation was not possible:

> I used to go to my friend's house – she just stayed round the corner. Or she used to come round to my house and we'd sit up in the room. But my dad, … I used to hate sitting in my room as well because he used to come up and annoy us in my room. I'm like that, shutting the door on him … Trying to get him away from me. (Kate, JRF, 16, father alcohol problems)

As a result, therefore, many respondents seemed to experience an uncomfortable lack of control or autonomy in the home, and, as will be discussed later, spent much time in

bedrooms or away from the house. First, however, it is important to understand how such feelings of exclusion or 'marginalisation' within the home environment, and consequent ambiguities in family relationships, were reinforced by, or indeed constructed through, sensory experience.

Sensory experience of space and not feeling 'at home'

The data contained many examples of how sensory experience helps to construct particular environments and relationships and whether or not those environments feel comfortable, 'normal', predictable or secure. Sensory experiences within the home often added to feelings of mistrust. Notably, FLP interviews with drug-using parents suggested that they had often attempted to conceal visual evidence of their drug use. These attempts at 'damage limitation' (Rhodes et al., 2010) were only partly successful, however. Several children just 'knew' that their parents were using in spite of denials, while some drug-using parents related having been found out and how their children had communicated this to them:

> We had a special drawer for all the needles and the drugs, and one day I opened up the drawer and there were two plastic skeletons in there, you know, rubber skeletons. (Larry, FLP, 49, former heroin injector)

Children's sensed knowledge often relied on other sorts of visual knowledge than actually finding paraphernalia, and on other senses, including touch and smell. Substance use was often associated with the home being dirty and unkempt, for example. Julia recalled the fruitless task of trying to clear up:

> I read a lot and painted, like in my room if I got the chance and I'd tidy quite a lot … On the weekend after school I'd be like, 'Great, this is my mission, I want to tidy the house'. But … like I'd start doing it and then I just went 'Oh no this is hopeless'. Like you'd just see someone like drop a can or something like that and you're going upstairs tidying. (JRF, 16, both parents alcohol use)

Noise, and particularly unwanted noise, seemed critical to respondents' construction of their homes (Wilson et al., 2012). Most respondents often described in detail how shouting, loud parties and music, or any noise at all at times of the day normatively associated with quiet, affected their sense of security at home and their relationships with their parents. Indeed, it

seemed to be these experiences that really framed their experience of their parents' substance misuse.

Tabetha, for example, described how her mother would wake her up in the night just to talk:

> She'll come in and wake me up because she needs somebody to talk to and that. It's no the fact that she's like needing somebody to talk to. I mean I'll talk to my mum if she needs anything but that's like I could be up for college early in the morning. And she like wakes us up late at night. (JRF, 17, mother alcohol use)

Emily (FLP, 13, both parents drugs) described how 'all the time there is always shouting in my house … never stops'. Whatever measures some parents took to conceal this noise, it would pass through often very thin internal walls. As Paul explained,

> It's not … it's not easy to not listen to them [shouting]
>
> [Right. Do you try to escape it then?]
>
> I can't. I'm upstairs, they're upstairs, […] And then they start shouting. [Uhuh.] The walls are like that thick, though. [Mmm.] So I can hear everything. (FLP, 12, both parents alcohol use)

In response, at certain times, respondents had tried to create or to seek out places which better approximated their idea of a secure home environment.

Young people's own sensory place-making

Paul's experience – like those of Kate and Julia recounted earlier – points to the difficulty of escaping difficult sensory experience within the home. However, several respondents recounted their attempts at sensory 'place-making' in domestic spaces, or at least of the production of a safer-feeling space, often in bedrooms. As in the quotation from Julia above, engaging in activities such as painting could help. Further, as Bull (2007) has argued, music can be used to 'warm up' space and create feelings of security. There were several positive accounts of how young people retreated to bedrooms and employed music or television as means of trying to block out unwelcome sounds, to escape difficult thoughts or feelings.

> [So, when stuff happened at home, would you go to places where you felt more safe, or talk to people…?]

> No, I'd just sit in my room. [Yeah?] If I was living there, I'd sit in my room, just watching telly. … 'cause they're just shouting or whatever, and I'll just go up into my room. … I would just sit there and just watch. (Nick, FLP, 18, both parents drug and alcohol use)

> '[The one thing above anything else that makes you deal with it..?]'

> 'Go up to my room and just stay there and just listen to my music.' (Emily, FLP, 13, both parents drug use)

Given the difficulties in creating such environments, however, several young people had sought out more welcoming and comfortable environments outside their home. Often such refuges were found in the homes of relatives, neighbours and friends, or at school.

In some cases, these arrangements – in particular where they involved relatives – led to temporary or more permanent residence. Several respondents recounted having spent periods living with aunties, uncles or older siblings. Others knew that they were always welcome at friends' houses. As Emily put it,

> I feel more safer round my friends' houses. Their parents don't shout as much as mine do and they don't get blamed for stuff.

Similarly, Julia recounted:

> I always enjoyed staying at other people's houses a lot … and there was a next door neighbour I always had tea with and stuff so, when I wasn't cooking, I could always go round there. (Julia, JRF, 16, both parents alcohol use)

An important element of the comfort provided in these places seemed to be that the respondents were not required to talk about their family situations but received emotional support through non-verbal means. Natalie, interviewed as a friend and 'significant other' of Dena, was intensely aware of the differences between the latter's and her own quiet and ordered home life. She often enjoyed the lack of structure and wildness of Dena's home, through which loud music pulsed at all hours, but was also happy to withdraw from it. She also knew that she could help Dena by providing a comfortable secure space without asking her what was wrong:

> Like if I went over there and … I was seeing that Lorna (Dena's mum) was getting really agitated or Dena was upset, I'd be like, 'come stay at mine, just watch a film or something'. Not like make it aware that she's having a rough night, just be like, 'come and stay at mine' sort of thing … she'd know deep down what I was saying, but … like, we know what we're talking about without saying it. (Natalie, friend of Dena 17, FLP, both parents drug and alcohol use)

Similar sorts of sensory comfort – a comfortable place to sit, some sustenance, some quiet with no obligation to speak or explain oneself – were sometimes also provided in an institutional context, for example at school:

> If I was having an off day, she'd [head teacher] let me sit in a corner on a beanbag and work in her office … She did it because she was generally a caring person who recognised a child needed help … and helped in the best way she thought possible … which was giving her a safe environment to work in where she could just be on her own, just work … have a cup of tea and a biscuit. (Beth, FLP, 14, father alcohol use)

Emily's teacher John, whom she named as a 'significant other', also pointed to the importance of such support. John, who was aware of some of Emily's family history and appreciated that she needed a space to just 'be', explained:

> Emily are you going to be finding it rough this morning?' 'Yes sir.' 'Well just go and sit in the corner' … At times she just needed to be there and be, and not talk about anything that was troubling her. Just to chat … and … that sense of normality and that sense of alternative parenting … Leave her be.

The reference to normality here, of knowing there was someone available to talk to but being able to choose when to talk, is important. In contrast, several respondents criticised the formality of their relationships with social workers, whose role, of course, required them to ask questions. In the following quotation, Dena associated social workers with very direct, formal, 'aggressive' questioning with no time for conversational niceties or time to consider a response:

> They would just ask me all the questions all the time and I just didn't like it … 'cause they were so direct …. It wasn't as if they'd come and say 'How are you?' It was coming in 'OK so you're living with your Mum and your Mum's blah, blah, blah and you …' … So aggressive and straight to the point, boom, you answer it this way or that way, like you can't go 'well'. It was horrible … I kind of felt like I

didn't have a choice but to answer questions … and I felt like I was constantly being analysed.

The costs and fragility associated with place-making

The respondents' 'place-making' strategies, whether within or outside of the home, were, therefore, very important to them. At the same time, it was clear that some of these strategies came at an emotional cost, while many were dependent on very fragile or difficult relationships. Spending time in one's bedroom watching television was very helpful, as discussed above, but could also be somewhat isolating:

> It helped me … just to get cut off from all that. [Yeah]. But also it was a bad thing, 'cause I was isolating myself. [Yeah]. And I didn't really have any friends. (Maria, JRF, 16, both parents alcohol use)

Similarly, Jenny recounted that the experience had left her with depression:

> I wouldn't want to be in the house with her [mother] you know, [I'd] just sit in my bedroom or watch TV or listen to music. And greet [cry] all the time and I was just so sad …. I was on anti-depressants at 15 year old. (Jenny, JRF, 17, mother alcohol use)

Similarly, while she had enjoyed spending time at her friends' houses, sharing their meals, this was a bittersweet experience. Jenny's perception of her friend's family may be somewhat idealised, but her sense of loss is clear from the following quotation:

> If I was at my chum's house, which I always was because I was never at home … and just to see how well they got on with their mum and their dad and all their brothers and sisters. They were so happy sitting having meals together. Going out and doing stuff. And I found it pretty hard just to think why could I nae have a family like that?

Dena also spoke of her relationship with Natalie and her family in similarly poignant terms:

> And it was when I was in year 7, so I was about 12 or 11, when I went round to her house and her mum and dad are together, and I'm not saying that that is normal because obviously single parents are normal as well, but it was weird how they had dinner at the same time every day, and they had to have a bath, 'cause I stayed there and they woke you up in the morning and it was just completely different and I

really liked it … and it made me feel uncomfortable going back to my mum's … knowing that I was missing. (Dena, FLP, 17, both parents drugs and alcohol use)

Further, while many friendships seemed to provide a very positive and reassuring (if bittersweet) influence, other close friendships had led a small minority of JRF respondents into self-destructive behaviour, including heroin use.

Another issue highlighted in these accounts was the fragility of many relationships that sustained the respondents' places 'to be'. Notably, several respondents related how they had lost the support of grandparents or aunties and uncles because the latter had tried to intervene in their parents' substance use. In some cases, such arguments reflected long-standing family conflicts. In any case, they increased the stress on the respondents, who felt obliged to manage the information they disclosed to these family members in order to avoid such confrontations.

Many institutional relationships were also fragile. Respondents were hugely grateful to individual workers who had stayed in contact over the years, even when their official connection had lapsed. Such relationships reflected, therefore, a degree of working around systems of short 'packages' of support, often tied to particular locations. In contrast, Emily, for example, recounted how she had lost all of the types of school support previously available to her on her transition to high school. Further, while John and another important primary school figure had attempted to raise this issue with social services, this had led nowhere, leaving Emily resigned to having to cope on her own.

Conclusions

The data presented in this chapter highlight important relationships between sensory experiences of the home – or of the place where one lives – and family relationships. For many respondents, living in an unkempt and sometimes noisy environment was difficult. Similarly, the ambiguity of environments in which substance use was imperfectly concealed was uncomfortable, injecting a fraughtness and mistrust into their relationships with their parents. Sensory experience, therefore, was an important element of the way that 'respondents grappled with complex emotions of anger, pity and love, sustaining belief that their parent cared *about* them, even though she or he was not able to care *for* them' (Backett-Milburn et al., 2008, p. 475).

While the author's main focus has been on sensory experience, such findings also rejoin arguments made in recent work on emotional geographies and, in particular, how 'emotions matter in the spatialities of children's lives and are inseparable from the social, emotional, economic, and political landscapes of childhood' (Blazek and Windram-Geddes, 2013, p. 1). These findings point to the importance of further research into the emotional geographies of different childhoods, and different relationships with adults, since the experiences of the young people in these projects were often not 'embedded within relationships with adults capable of providing an ideal balance between "closeness, love and support" and "freedom (space/time/symbolic/moral), autonomy and respect" ' (Jones, 2013, p. 5). On the contrary, these young people often felt pushed into bedrooms or out of the house completely, as in the case of Emily, leading to anger and resentment. Several respondents sought out more comfortable environments elsewhere, places where they could just 'be', supported in taking refuge from such strong emotions for a moment, while the validity of such emotions was also implicitly, if not explicitly, recognised. Meanwhile, some of these young people's experiences suggested a yearning for, but lack of, closeness, support and good memories attached to the home spaces in which they felt they should belong (drawing on Ahmed, 2004; Bartos, 2013). Such yearning is clear in Jenny's and Dena's accounts of eating and staying over at friends' homes.

The potential importance of understanding and taking account of such emotions is only emphasised by the work of Holt et al. (2013), who argue, drawing on Bourdieu, that 'emotional relationships underpin the acquisition of social and cultural capital and the development of habitus' (2013, p. 35) and thus, they argue, play an important role in the reproduction of social and economic inequalities. In these studies, it was clear that, although Jenny had been determined to do well at school, her experience of depression as a teenager ate into her ability to take advantage of her qualifications. Similarly, at the same time as providing necessary support, the effect on Emily and Beth of spending long periods outside of the classroom, in head teachers' offices or other spaces, may raise concerns related to their education in the long term.

Such findings may be very useful to practitioners working with parents and children. In particular, they provide a more specific and grounded understanding of children's and young people's experience of parental substance misuse than is often communicated through the more abstract terms, such as 'neglect' or 'detached parent–child relationships', commonly

used in practice and policy-making. They suggest practical starting points for talking with parents about the effects of their substance use and fostering better communication between parents and children where possible. Further, in addition to oft-made points in relation to school transitions, a greater appreciation of and support for various often fragile, but longer-term, supportive relationships providing a sense of belonging would seem important. Extended families, friends, and the families of friends provided the sort of sensory comfort and sense of 'normal' relationships and affection that many types of services cannot, but seemed to receive little social work acknowledgement or support, thus increasing the likelihood of the young people losing access to some of these places in which they could just 'be'.

The resource and time pressures faced by practising social workers, who do have to ask difficult questions, should not be minimised. However, Dena's account of feeling aggressively hassled by social workers demanding quick responses to difficult questions points to the need for all institutional supports to take greater care in building up relationships with young people over time. It also suggests the importance of non-verbal communication and of maintaining an atmosphere of warmth, security and care in this process. Similarly, in relation to research, these findings also highlight the need to consider developing methods which would allow research participants the space for various forms of non-verbal communication, or as Blazek and Windram-Geddes put it, approaches to 'children's emotions without requirements to have them voiced' (2013, p. 1). Such concerns have animated the author's subsequent research employing a range of visual and auditory methods. However, more work is required on such methods and their ethical implications, as well as the need to consider their dissemination in ways that might make a difference to the lives of young people living in very difficult circumstances.

Implications for policy and practice

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☐ Professionals' awareness of parents' substance misuse does not necessarily translate into knowing how it is experienced by children and young people in a more sensory, grounded and practical way.

☐ Young people appreciate a wide range of informal and professional support relationships, many of which are also associated with comfortable and secure places to just 'be'.

- ☐ Young people appreciate professionals who give them the space to build trust as well as the choice of whether to talk or not, what to disclose and at what pace.
- ☐ Social work decision-makers need to recognise and support a broader range of informal and formal sources of support.
- ☐ Support arrangements should be long-term, and should follow the young person and not be defined by institutional boundaries.

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Acknowledgements

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