
REFLECTIONS

Young Lives & Imagined Futures: Analysing & Re-Analysing Narrative Data on Young Lives

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INTRODUCTION

For the past four years I, along with Rosalind Edwards, have been working on project one of the Timescapes study - *'Your Space! Siblings and Friends'*. We have been invited to offer some closing reflections on the seminar in order to encourage and instigate discussion.

Ros is unwell and unfortunately not able to attend but I would like to acknowledge her contribution to the formulation of these reflections, as well as the thoughts of Graham Crow.

I will begin by summarising the six papers presented today, before providing a very brief outline of what I see as the overriding themes and emerging substantive issues.

SUMMARY OF PAPERS

I'm sure you'll all agree that today's exploration of young people's futures, drawing on historical and contemporary work, has been fascinating and very insightful. The six papers have engaged with a diverse range of data sources from the British Birth Cohort Studies and the British Household Panel Survey through to data collected as part of Timescapes and other qualitative studies.

The seminar commenced with Jane Elliot's paper *'Doing gender through imagined gendered futures'* that explored a subset of essays completed by 11-year-olds participating in the 1958 British Birth Cohort Study. The essays invited children to imagine their life at the age of 25. Jane used an innovative quantitative approach (discriminant function analysis) to analyse the characteristics of girls' and boys' essays. The essays are a fascinating and relatively untapped resource (aside, of course from Jane's work with Ginny Morrow).

Heather Laurie's paper *'Where are they now? Pathways into early adulthood'* used the British Household Panel Survey to look at pathways into early adulthood. Heather focused on examining the value of analysing qualitative verbatim responses given by the Youth Panel to complement other quantitative analysis and enhance understanding. For me, this paper really highlighted the value of linking qualitative and quantitative data.

Ingrid Schoon's paper *'High hopes in a changing world: Career aspiration in three UK age cohorts'* closed the morning session. Ingrid drew on quantitative and qualitative material from three British Birth Cohorts to examine change and continuity in aspirations over historical time, focusing particularly on career and identity.

Graham Crow and Dawn Lyon's paper *'The imagined futures of young people on Sheppey in 1978'* kick-started the afternoon session. They drew on essays completed by 142 school leavers on the Isle of Sheppey in 1978. Young people were invited to imagine they were at the end of their lives and to reflect on their past. This paper was of great personal interest having spent my childhood living on an Island.

Mandy Winterton and Sarah Irwin's paper *'Youngsters' expectations and context'* explored their experiences of re-using data from the Timescapes study to explore young people's expectations of the future, especially those following 'non standard' familial trajectories. Mandy and Sarah demonstrated the 'messiness' and potentials and pitfalls involved in the process of secondary analysis. This paper was of particular personal interest as it used cases from our own Timescapes study.

Finally, Jeni Harden's paper '*Hopes for the future*' drew on material from the 'Work and Family Lives' Timescapes project to introduce the perspectives of both children and parents on children's future employment orientations. Drawing on qualitative material she suggested that children's employment futures are part and parcel of families' present lives and practices, and past encounters.

OVERRIDING THEMES

I would now like to offer some potential points of discussion drawing on some of the themes emerging from the papers:

(i) *Agency and structure*

First, I think it would be interesting to discuss notions of structure and agency in light of today's presentations. The emphasis in youth studies, and indeed social research, on theories of individualisation and individualised notions of choice, arguably masks structural constraints and inequalities, overshadowing the contexts and conditions under which young people make choices. In late modernity, young people, as 'choice biographers', are forced to negotiate their own paths to adulthood, taking responsibility for outcomes that may well be beyond their control. Structure can, therefore, be posited as 'the silent discourse'. Today, the significance of class, economic change, familial and gendered expectations, historical or world events, and political, economic and social contexts has been apparent. For example, Ingrid spoke of the 'persisting influence of structural forces'.

- What of structure in young people's imagined futures?
- What about change and continuity in young people's sense of the opportunities and resources available to them?

You may be interested in some analysis Ros and I have recently conducted using our Timescapes data to explore teenagers' paths to adulthood before and during the recession. We found that some young people, particularly those who'd always planned to go to university and had financial support from their families, did not appear to be changing their plans as a result of the recession. Others had never had firm plans about the future but a range of different ideas. Again, with some degree of support from their families they took up any opportunities as they arose. Those not in education, employment or training appeared particularly vulnerable to the effects of the recession. Even before experiencing unemployment they had always felt uncertain about the future. Some had a firm idea of what they wanted to do when they were young and had stuck with that idea. The recession appeared to be making them more determined to fulfil their ambitions.

(ii) *Methods*

Second, it may be useful to look at methodological issues. It is apparent from the presentations that different methods of data collection and analysis reveal different aspects of young people's imagined futures. The papers have outlined an innovative array of approaches designed to help better understand imagined futures, for example, the use of quantitative analysis techniques to examine qualitative material (e.g. Jane), complementing and combining quantitative with qualitative analysis (e.g. Heather, Ingrid) and re-using qualitative material, both spoken word and written accounts (e.g. Graham and Dawn, Mandy and Sarah, Jeni).

- What if different methods reveal different things? Is this where interest is most likely to lie?
- How do we compare datasets from different studies and/or collected at different times (e.g. contemporary and historical material)?
- What tools have/can be used to engage young people in their imagined futures?
- What are the implications of different methods in shaping young people's accounts? Many of those mentioned (e.g. essays) rely on confidence in reading and writing. Do we see participants' accounts differently when we read their hand-written accounts in comparison to transcribed versions of their essays?
- How can we access and understand the context of participants' lives in secondary analysis?

(iii) *Time and space*

Time is implicitly implicated in debates surrounding the future and I found Jeni's discussion of different conceptualisations of the future very useful. It also struck me today (and from our own work) how significant

the past and/or present are in shaping imagined futures, as Ingrid also suggested. During the seminar different dimensions of time have been apparent:

- *Generational time* - through the use of cohort data (e.g. Ingrid) and the perspectives of children and parents (e.g. Jeni).
- *Historical time* – I felt that Ingrid usefully overlaid her data with key historical events. Some of the presentations focused on young people’s accounts of looking forward to the future (e.g. Jane, Mandy and Sarah), whilst others focused on young people imagining they were at the end of their lives looking back (e.g. Graham and Dawn).
- *Biographical time* – Many of the papers engaged with shifting expectations, aspirations and circumstances with respect to individual and family biographies.

In thinking about generational time, with respect to our own analysis we felt that much emphasis has been placed on parents’ hopes for their children’s futures. We turned this theme on its head and instead focused on children’s hopes for their parents’ futures.

As a geographer I am interested in how space is implicated in imagined futures. Perhaps it would be useful to reflect on geographical differences across the U.K. or on the connotations of geographical mobility. I wonder to what extent imaginings of possible futures are shaped by past and present experiences of different spaces. For instance, in my previous work one participant, a white working-class boy, described very specifically his aspiration to live in a ‘posh house’ on a new-build estate in a neighbouring affluent suburb. Much of his life centred on his immediate vicinity and so his imaginings of what might be possible in the future were shaped by his lived experience of different spaces. This example also made me think about the potential influence of cyberspace and virtual networks and experiences in (re)shaping imagined futures.

SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

Finally then, I have identified a couple of substantive themes:

First, imagined futures and trajectories are shaped by:

- Gender and gendered expectations (e.g. Jane, Heather, Ingrid)
- Class and access to resources (e.g. Jane, Heather, Jeni, Mandy and Sarah)
- Generational perspectives and experiences (e.g. Ingrid, Jeni).
- Other dimensions of family background and circumstances, including:
 - Parental and/or cultural expectations.
 - The influence of siblings and friends.
- The broader political, economic and social contexts to young people’s lives (e.g. Ingrid).

Second, imagined futures can be:

- Diverse and heterogeneous (e.g. Heather, Ingrid)
- Evolving and shifting (e.g. Heather, Ingrid, Graham and Dawn)
- ‘Risk laden but navigable’ (e.g. Jeni)
- Not just about careers or work life but family life and other lived experiences (e.g. Jane, Graham and Dawn).

BRIEF CONCLUSION

Overall, I feel the seminar has demonstrated the value of linking quantitative datasets that provide broad patterns/overviews with qualitative data that focuses in-depth on processes. We have also seen the importance of not simply looking at individualised trajectories but a relational approach that recognises the significance of family, friends and acquaintances, as well as, the role of broader structural forces in shaping young people’s imagined futures.