

Timescapes Project 2

Young Lives and Times: The crafting of young people's relationships and identities over time

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, patterns of parenthood, care, intimacy, and family life are widely understood to be diverse, fluid, and open to negotiation. How do young people work out their relationships and define their identities in this changing context?

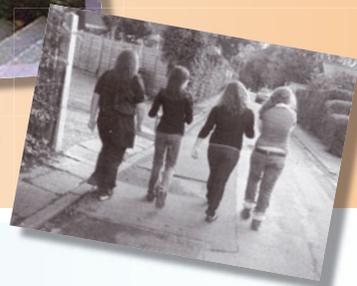
The Young Lives and Times project follows an age cohort of young people from varied backgrounds as they grow through their teenage years and into early adulthood. Phase one of the project (October 2005-September 2008) was established under Neale's ESRC fellowship and extended through the Real Life Methods node of the National Centre for Research Methods.

Phase two of the project, funded under Timescapes, commenced in October 2008. The project explores in some depth the crafting of young people's personal lives and relationships, and the construction and reconstruction of their biographies over time. The aim of the project is to shed light on how and to what extent young people's life chances and well-being during early adulthood are linked to their earlier relational and biographical experiences.



The main things I like are:
Rollerblading, making music,
drawing, taking photos,
sleeping, eating and football

These are like my best friends that I'm with (...). Everyone always says that we look a bit like the Beatles walking in to the distance.



RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The project is located in varied communities in a Metropolitan city in the North of England. Forty young men and women with diverse backgrounds in terms of class, ethnicity, locality, ability, and family circumstance, were recruited into the project via schools, youth groups and a widening participation programme for disadvantaged youth. We will also be boosting this sample with sub groups of teenage parents through Sure Start. The project involves an intensive tracking of young lives using a rich array of ethnographic methods: participant observation, conversational interviews, written accounts, and the joint production of sound and visual data:

- repeat interviews at 12 / 18 month intervals
- self-portraits, timelines, relational maps and photo elicitation
- collages and artwork
- diaries and video diaries
- walkabouts
- repeat 'official' photographs
- participants' forum and workshops

The project is participatory in nature, with methods employed flexibly in line with participants' individual styles and preferences.

Research questions:

- How do young people construct their personal relationships and identities over time?
- How do young people define, experience, balance and move between their family, friendship, intimate and community relationships over time?
- What are the changing values and sources of morality that young people draw upon in constructing their relationships and identities?
- How do young people make sense of their past, present and future?
- How do they refine their ideas at different turning points in their lives as they 'overwrite' their biographies?
- What opportunities and constraints exist in young people's lives and how far is the notion of 'life planning' applicable to them?
- How do diverse aspirations and subjective experiences relate to standard dimensions of social difference and inequality?

ACADEMIC AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Currently we lack detailed knowledge of young people's friendships, family lives and romantic or sexual relationships, particularly of the processes through which these are forged, sustained, lost or discarded through their teenage years. It is often presumed that these processes are bound up with young people's family cultures, in particular, the extent to which they are embedded in their families and the nature of their intergenerational relationships with their parents and other kin. Indeed there is evidence to suggest that the ability of young people to form stable adult relationships and take on the commitments and responsibilities of family life and citizenship, is causally linked to their earlier family experiences, although longitudinal data that are contextually sensitive enough to shed light on these processes are currently limited.

The project will explore 'what matters' to a new cohort of young people, brought up in a climate in which families may take many different shapes and forms. The project will extend our knowledge of young people's values, aspirations and

experiences of friendship, love, sex, cohabitation, marriage and parenthood, and how their relational identities and values are shaped through and, in turn, shape their practices over time.

We will be tracking the young people through key transition points in their lives, for example, as they enter intimate relationships, leave compulsory schooling and reach the age of majority. The project will investigate the consequences for families of the current trend towards the compression of childhood and the expansion of dependent young adulthood, as stages in the life course, and the extent to which young people are supported both personally and professionally through their teenage years. Selected case studies of young people receiving state support will shed light on how their needs for education, health, housing, and benefits are being met, and the long term effectiveness of the support they receive.