



TIMESCAPES FINAL REPORT

Project 2: Young Lives and Times Project Report

Researchers: Bren Neale (project director) b.neale@leeds.ac.uk

Sarah Irwin s.irwin@leeds.ac.uk

Carmen Lau-Clayton c.lau@leeds.ac.uk

Esmee Hanna. e.s.hanna@leeds.ac.uk

Anna Bagnoli was employed as researcher on the earlier phase of the project, 2006-8

Aims and objectives

This study followed an age cohort of young people to explore the unfolding of their personal and family relationships over time, and their changing educational aspirations and achievements. The project aimed to shed light on how young people practice and ‘work out’ their personal relationships over a period of significant change during their teenage years, and in relation to their past experiences and their values and aspirations for the future. There is evidence to suggest that the life chances of young people – their ability to achieve stable relationships in adult life, and to achieve well educationally - are causally linked to their earlier family experiences. However, longitudinal data that can shed light on how these influences operate are limited. We aimed to investigate these patterns and processes through a broadly constructed sample of young people, and more intensively through a subsample of young people entering early parenthood.

Methodologically, the project aimed to explore the ethics of prospectively tracking young people over time, to test out ways to capture time through empirical fieldwork, and to assess the potential for data linkages with large scale longitudinal studies (BHPS youth survey and the LSYPE).

We addressed the following substantive research questions:

- How do young people construct their personal relationships and identities over time?
- What are the changing values and sources of morality that young people draw upon in constructing their relationships and identities?
- 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?

Research Design and Methodology: Main sample

Young Lives and Times was conducted under Timescapes from 2010 to 2012. This followed an earlier phase of the project (2006-9) funded and conducted at the University of Leeds under Neale's ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Fellowship and the Real Lives node of the National Centre for Research Methods. The main sample of 29 young people was recruited in 2006 via focus groups held in schools and youth clubs. We consulted with the young people on the ethics and practicalities of undertaking a prospective study that was designed to run through their teenage years. We used video clips from the ITV documentary, Seven Up, as a stimulus to discussion (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). The young people were aged 13-



14 at the outset of the study and lived in socially varied neighbourhoods in an industrial city in the north of England. Despite our best efforts, we were able to recruit more young people from affluent neighbourhoods than from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This indicated the need for a more targeted approach for disadvantaged young people, which we adopted for the subsample.

Three waves of fieldwork were conducted over a four year period (2006-7, 2008, 2010). Semi structured interviews were complemented with a palette of ethnographic methods, including video and photographic data, diagrammatic methods (e.g. timelines), writing exercises and ethnographic walking interviews. Repeat relational maps charted changes in networks, friendship and family groups (Hannah and Lau 2012). A significant amount of data was generated directly by the young people, including collages, drawings, video documentaries and video diaries (Bagnoli 2009). Each wave of fieldwork informed the next, exemplifying the flexibility of a method that seeks to 'walk alongside' people as their lives unfold. Life histories and imagined futures were captured through interviews and the use of timelines (Hannah and Lau 2012). Interactive public exhibitions and workshops, funded under the ESRC Festival of Social Science (2009, 2011), were also held, actively engaging the young people and displaying their own documentation of their lives. As part of the first event, held in 2008, we organised a video box evaluation for the young people, including their reflections on participating in the study.

For the first wave of fieldwork we gathered life histories of the young people and details of their current lives across the domains of family, schooling and peer group. For the second wave, we investigated changes since the first research encounter, and focused on future aspirations through written accounts and the use of future time lines. The third wave (2010) explored further changes in their lives over time, with the young people looking back at their lives over the course of the study, and a more detailed exploration of their intimate relationships and changes in their imagined futures. Our palette of methods also changed for the second phase, with more emphasis given under Timescapes to in-depth conversational interviews, supplemented with diagrammatic visual methods, and less to photographic and video methods and to ethnographic approaches. The multiple methods used initially were useful to our participatory way of working and suited our initial methodological focus, but created some challenges for the team in working analytically across such varied data formats to address our substantive research questions.

The gap in fieldwork and loss of continuity of researchers over this period (a new researcher resigned through ill health), resulted in some sample attrition: by wave 3 the main sample was reduced to 20 young people, with considerable over representation of affluent participants and a bias towards young women. However, in 2010, we recruited a new subsample of young and mainly disadvantaged fathers (described below). We were therefore able to boost the overall sample and adjust the socio-economic and gender balance of cases across the sample.

The project has documented a range of ethical issues, including ongoing consent, confidentiality, managing research relationships over time, sample attrition (and the process of re-engagement over time) and researcher continuity. The principles of emergent and situated ethics were adopted, and are highly suited to QL enquiry. Our group based video



box evaluation was effective and revealed how the need for identity protection may run counter to the participants' desire to make their lives 'count'. They were overwhelmingly supportive of archiving their data, and sharing their accounts with a wider pool of bone fide researchers. This finding has significance for the ethics of data archiving and re-use.

Working across Datasets

In order to address the potential for linking data across datasets, a regional survey (N=489) was carried out in the first year of the study. This was designed to contextualise the in-depth study and act as a bridge between the qualitative project and national level datasets. It was completed by young people via schools in the city and surrounding area (Irwin 2010) and also completed by the participants in the qualitative longitudinal study. Our work in this area has generated new insights on the drive to 'mixed' methods research and how best to conceptualise the process of bringing diverse data into conversation with each other (Neale 2009; Irwin 2010).

Following Fathers

The design for this new strand of the study was finalised during 2010 in consultation with the teenage pregnancy co-ordinators for the Yorkshire and Humber region. Our decision to focus on young fathers was important in terms of potential societal impact. This is an under-researched group, and there was a clearly expressed need among service providers to better understand the values and practices of young fathers, to tailor provision to meet their needs and, thereby, to more effectively address the targets of the national teenage pregnancy strategy.

Working closely with one practitioner group in the region, we recruited 12 young fathers into the study, using focus groups as a means to recruit the young men, to introduce the study, to document group reflections on the themes of the research, and to generate a sense of group identity among the participants. The young men were aged between 15 and 25 at first interview. They were tracked intensively over a 15 month period, through three waves of individual, in-depth conversational interviews, supplemented with visual methods (time lines, relational maps and photographs), and the use of vignettes to tease out values on sexuality and early conception. Two interviews were conducted with the key practitioner who supports most of the young men. The active involvement of the local practitioners (a local authority learning mentor) was crucial in recruiting and maintaining this hard to reach sample.

We investigated the changes in the young men's lives following entry to parenthood;; their family histories and childhoods; their values and practices surrounding conception, abortion and fatherhood; their relationships with the mothers and grandparents of their children; how their varied needs – for parenting support, education, housing and childcare – were being met over time; and to what extent they were supported by extended family and/or the state.

Data from the general study were analysed longitudinally, and in relation to data from other Timescapes datasets and Quantitative Longitudinal datasets. Analysis of the Following Fathers data is ongoing. The rich datasets from the two components of the study have been archived with Timescapes.



Substantive Findings

Findings indicate the enduring significance of family relationships in forging young people's aspirations and anticipated life journeys. Key turning points in young people's lives include family changes (births, deaths, family moves, parental separation and re-partnering), school transitions, particularly moving to a new school, and changes in friendship networks. Where young people have direct and cumulative experiences of family change, these dominate their accounts. Analysis of case study data in relation to national level data sheds light on variations in young people's trajectories (Irwin 2010). Below we summarise our findings relating to educational trajectories and inequalities, based on case study analysis from the main sample, and on the life chances of young fathers, based on initial analysis of the Following Fathers data.

1. **Changing Educational Trajectories over time: A secondary analysis.** Over recent years significant policy efforts have been expended to reduce class based inequalities in access to Higher Education (HE) for young people. Even so, those from middle class, professional backgrounds are more likely to aspire to and take up such opportunities. Factors that influence young people's aspirations – class background and family culture, the academic background and professional standing of parents, school environment, and the influence and support of parents, teachers, friends and peers - have been well documented. However, very little research explores the complex intersection of these factors, or traces how these are played out biographically over young people's teenage years. There is little research, too, on students who are the first generation in their families to aspire to Higher Education. Building on earlier cross sectional findings (Irwin 2009), Winterton and Irwin (2012) address these gaps in knowledge through a secondary longitudinal analysis of Young Lives and Times data. They trace the educational trajectories of six young women from varied class backgrounds over a four year period. Two of the young women have academic identities that were strongly fixed from an early age and which endured through their teenage years. The varied influences outlined above, including a family culture based on the high academic and professional standing of their parents, were strongly aligned and meshed together to reinforce this identity throughout their schooling. A further two young women were the first generation in their families to aspire to HE. Marked differences were evident in their aspirations at age 14 and 17. Their academic identity was not inherited but evolved over their teenage years through the alignment of other influences – notably their attendance at privileged schools, friendship influence, parental encouragement and financial support. The remaining young women were from less advantaged backgrounds. They aspired to degree level study at age 14, based on academic ability and the influence of friends, although without a family culture of academic identity or strong parental encouragement. However, the varied influences on these young women's lives were far from aligned or uniform; they moved in and out of view over time, and sometimes pulled them in different directions. The authors trace the fluctuations in their academic identities through their teenage years, making it difficult for them to consolidate their aspirations, which remained tenuous by the age of 17, and with the added financial pressures of high fees to deter them. Despite their innate abilities and engagement in 6th form studies, the pathway to HE for these young women remained in the balance. The QL evidence enabled a more nuanced understanding of internal class diversity and the dynamic structure of class inequalities. The findings help to explain continuing inequalities in access to HE, and have implications for policy initiatives designed to reduce such inequalities.



2. **Following Young Fathers: The lived experience of young fatherhood.** The intensive tracking of the 12 young fathers has uncovered the highly contingent nature of their daily lives and relationships, including frequent changes of residence. The study revealed a raft of challenges facing the young men in entering and sustaining parenthood. Beyond the learning curve of direct child care, these include conflicting identities and lifestyles as they negotiate their dual status as young men and fathers; and challenges in their relationships with the mother and one or both sets of grandparents; entering parenthood is more likely to be equated with entering lone parenthood, for this group of young people. Further challenges include practical issues of income, housing and schooling, and, in a number of cases, complex needs arising from troubled childhoods. The future horizons of the young men, revealed through time lines and in interview, may necessarily be limited: long term goals may give way to short term decision making. Planning for the arrival of a child, for example, may mean saving up to buy nappies, rather than any longer term life planning. However, despite a lack of preparation for parenthood, these young men attached great importance to their children; and have strong values around conception, parenthood and abortion. Stereotypes of 'feckless' fathers are unhelpful where young men are striving to become good parents. Support from family and from professionals is vital, but provision is sparse. Young men benefit from professional involvement that is impartial and flexible, and that offers emotional as well as practical support. Bringing fathers more actively into the orbit of the Family-Nurse partnership scheme, for example, would be beneficial: the positive focus of this service can complement the child protection focus of social care teams. The early findings show the power of fatherhood to create a new, responsible and potentially fulfilling future for these young men. They also highlight the need for sustained support to both forge and achieve these new aspirations. Understanding the tenor of young fathers' lives, their histories, current circumstances and future aspirations, is also important if their life chances – and those of their children - are to be improved (Neale and Lau 2011; Lau and May 2011; Lau 2012 forthcoming; Neale and Lau 2012b forthcoming).

Early/Anticipated Impacts

In terms of academic impact, the study has produced new insights and contributed to substantive, theoretical and methodological knowledge, through presentations and a range of publications.

The following fathers study has also begun to create societal impact. This was achieved through the active involvement of local practitioners in the design and conduct of the research – a *knowledge to action* approach which replaces knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange. This approach is described in our impact methods guide (Neale and Morton 2012) and our ESRC impact case study (Neale and Lau 2012a). The engagement of the key practitioner in the fieldwork has fostered innovation in research-based practice. For example, the practitioner has adopted timelines in his work with the young men, based on the insight that effective support depends on a greater appreciation of their life journeys, time horizons and how they formulate their aspirations. The researchers and practitioner have also been jointly engaged in the presentation of findings from the study (Lau and May 2011). The emergent findings were distilled in a bespoke policy briefing paper (Neale and Lau 2011), which has been widely circulated and has fed into the development of a new service delivery plan within the local Teenage Pregnancy Team. The research has also resulted in the setting up of a Following Fathers network, comprising researchers, policy makers and a range of practitioners across the statutory and third sectors. Further work is planned with our project partners to roll out the learning from the research, including the



joint production of practitioner guides, a training seminar and training materials, including resources on young men's values and practices surrounding conception, pregnancy, and parenthood.

Future Plans

Analysis of the rich dataset gathered for Young Lives and Times is ongoing and further publications are currently in progress.

The Following Fathers research has generated a great deal of interest from policy and practice and is ripe for further development. We have produced a proposal to extend the research, boosting the existing sample and carrying out further waves of fieldwork, conducting secondary analysis of related datasets, and developing a longitudinal evaluation of new service provision for young fathers.