

LIFE STORIES IN DEVELOPMENT: THOUGHTS ON NARRATIVE METHODS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract

Qualitative research has taken a distinctly 'narrative turn'. This article questions whether and how narrative methods differ when used with young people. The discussion first explores young people's developing abilities to create stories about themselves and their worlds, as they connect their various experiences in order to make sense of them. Discussion then moves on to examine examples of research with young people using mobile and creative methods which have been chosen over conventional interview methods for their potential both to engage young people and to enable them to fashion their own stories. These examples come from a range of disciplines, including youth studies, social geography, anthropology and education. One common feature is the attempt to reduce power differentials between (adult) researchers and (young) participants. This, of course, is particularly salient for research with young offenders and in youth justice settings where complex issues of power and disempowerment are at play. The final elements of discussion suggest there would be benefits for criminologists in exploring narrative methodologies as a more participative way of researching with young people.

Keywords

Youth research; narrative methods; life stories; identity.

Introduction

Human beings are natural story-tellers (McAdams & McLean, 2013); we habitually create narratives to give purpose and meanings to our lives, actions and identities. It is also argued that stories serve a variety of social functions, including evaluating past experiences, persuading an audience of a particular point of view or drawing the audience into the experience of the narrator (Reissman, 2008). Although not necessarily used consciously, narratives may nevertheless be viewed as 'strategic, functional and purposeful. Storytelling is selected over non-narrative forms of communication to accomplish certain ends' (Reissman, 2008:8). It is therefore not surprising that narratives have caught the attention of social researchers and that over the past two decades we have seen a decisive 'narrative turn' in qualitative research.

Of course there is huge variation in what 'counts' as narrative and the extent to which stories are developed and sustained (Bamberg, 2006; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009). In particular, narratives of self and identity tend to differ in complexity and coherence according to age. McAdams (1993) suggests that our personal myths are constantly reworked over the lifecycle, starting with the early creation of story themes and our own personal fables from adolescence. The qualitative methods used with young people to collect their biographical stories must, therefore, reflect their growing sense of 'a life lived' and abilities to make connections between, and derive meaning from, their life experiences. Different methods, of course, may be needed where the research is action-oriented, rather than reflective, and focused on the use of narrative in social interactions to construct identity (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). In either case research has to engage young people and sustain their interest. To this end, researchers in areas such as youth studies, social geography, anthropology and education have explored innovative methodologies including visual or walking methods, diaries in various media or a combination of these. This article explores examples of such methods and considers their use within criminology. Here we have seen narrative enquiry used with adults (most famously by Shadd Maruna (2001) in *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*) but strikingly little attention to creative methods as a means of eliciting narratives from young people.

The article goes on to examine concerns about the power relations that exist, of course, in all research but are heightened in the case of young people. This is especially so where the research takes place within schools, for example, or where access is negotiated through institutional gatekeepers (Heath et al., 2009; Hopkins, 2010). Furthermore, while creative methodologies can help reduce power differentials between adults and young people, researchers should not assume that this will happen automatically. Close attention to the research process and a reflexive and critical approach is therefore needed throughout (Punch, 2002). The article ends with thoughts on the benefits and potential limitations of creative methods and narrative research generally with young people, and their potential value within criminology.

Emerging life stories

Unlike life history, which has a basis in objective facts, life stories are subjective, fashioned from memories and reflections (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The ability to construct stories

and to make meaning out of events and personal experience develops over childhood and increases during adolescence. Research shows that in mid-adolescence young people typically master a greater range of cognitive skills that better equip them to manage contradictions and paradox both in the world around them and in aspects of their own identities (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Self-stories consequently grow in complexity, linked to the growing capacity for what Habermas and Bluck (2000) term *autobiographical reasoning*. They argue that this is the principal mechanism through which 'individuals attempt to integrate past and present events into a coherent and meaningful representation of their lives' (Bluck & Habermas, 2000:136). They suggest that this involves constructing a cognitive schema to order and to make sense of these life events and their emotional, motivational and other impacts.

In truth there is no universally accepted account of the relationship between the narrative construction of self and identity, with authors giving different degrees of weight to psycho-social processes, cultural repertoires and resources, and performance and social relations (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). McAdams (1993; 1996), for example, sees identity construction through narrative as happening through an imaginative rendering of past, present and future in a way that gives meaning and coherence. This is a largely internal process at one end of Smith and Sparkes' (2008) suggested continuum. At the other, externalising versions see narrative identity as situated in specific social contexts and interactions (including the many transactions that take place in youth justice settings).

This invites us to consider the social and psychological elements of narrative identity in adolescence and the extent to which it is produced through internal processes or in response to external events and relations, a question that seems by no means settled. Naturally, young people will engage in 'identity-work' in diverse ways but research nevertheless suggests typical progress towards the developmental task of constructing a relatively stable, albeit not fixed, adult identity. Interestingly Habermas and Bluck's (2000) review of the relatively few studies on the life stories of adolescents outlines the evidence of their growing capacity to bring events and experiences together to create an over-arching narrative which integrates diverse elements and displays increasing global coherence. They further identify four key domains where cognitive development contributes to coherence: temporal which includes a sense of the sequence of past events and how they are related; cultural which implies growing awareness of biographical norms and expectations of life stages and transitions; thematic, including elements of evaluation and summary, as well as comparison across life episodes; and causal coherence, by which they mean the ability to link events and to develop explanations (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The timing and rate of development may vary across these domains. Growth in causal coherence is possibly the most significant (Bluck & Habermas, 2000) as a young person starts to employ the skills of autobiographical reasoning to explain actions or suggest causes for events in terms of personality traits, needs or motivations that are continuous across time (Fivush et al., 2011). And on occasions there is also an opposing need to account for discrepancies or discontinuities. Again the young person may associate him or herself with relatively stable personal qualities, but in this case to underline how a particular behaviour or event - perhaps drug use or act of aggression - is atypical or out of character, essentially a 'not like me' event (Pasupathi et al., 2007:105).

In relation to coherence and credibility, McAdams marks the distinction between the '*I*' that is narrating and creating self, and the '*Me*' that is the self that is being narrated. He contends that:

'The main function of a life story is integration. By binding together disparate elements within the *Me* into a broader narrative frame, the selfing process can make a patterned identity out of what may appear, at first blush, to be a random and scattered life. The *I* can provide an integrated telling of the self as a more or less followable and believable story.'
(McAdams, 1996:309)

Of course, the process he outlines may be more or less complex depending on cultural context or the skills of the narrator, and according to the different demands and functions of the life story at particular life stages. Both distance and perspective are needed to understand the past and its connection to the self (McLean, 2008). These tend to come into play during adolescence as individuals start to identify the life events which have been most personally significant, what Fivush et al. (2011) call 'self-defining memories'. This coincides with wider societal expectations of self-presentation in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) which (in modern Western society at least) presuppose a high degree of reflexivity and active work on identity (McAdams, 1996). At this pivotal stage, young people may draw on their parents and families as a key resource to help them develop autobiographical content and co-construct identity from shared memories and stories. Yet even where such support is in place, the work involved in making meaning out of events and experiences is not necessarily comfortable and, for some young people, may be detrimental to well-being (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Related work by Pasupathi and colleagues (2007) examined the relationship between life experiences and identity, exploring the developmental implications of these 'self-event relations'. Many narratives have no immediate relevance to self and identity, having other purposes entirely. But they were able to group those that do into four categories. The first type of self-event link they suggest is explanatory, where the narrator seeks to show how the 'self' caused the event to occur and presents this as evidence of stability and continuity in his or her personal traits or qualities. This then allows the event to be incorporated into his or her life narrative, in a way that reaffirms the existing sense of self. Pasupathi et al. call their second type of link 'dismissal'. Here the narrator sees the behaviour or event as incongruent with self, so may explain it away as due to circumstances or as a 'first and last time' incident and, consequently, reject it from the life story.

The third and fourth types of links both relate to changes in an individual's self-perception. In the one case these are caused by events or experiences that result in an altered view of self. If such events or experiences are problematic, as in illness or assault, the narrative themes developed may be 'redemptive' indicating growth and resilience, or conversely 'contaminating' and therefore personally diminishing. For criminology, the interest here may lie in how individuals respond to life events and their capacities to cope, given that the histories of many young offenders disproportionately feature experiences of discontinuity, loss and abuse. And there is further interest in the effects of significant

criminal justice events on young people - arrest, conviction, detention, not least amongst these.

Finally, Pasupathi et al. identified a 'reveal' connection which is rarer but potentially most troubling. This is seen in narratives arguing that an experience has disclosed or revealed to the narrator a quality that previously existed but went unrecognised (Pasupathi et al., 2007). The narrator may then need to rework aspects of his or her 'self' to embed the newly revealed element of identity and possibly to account for its previous absence from the self-story. Again, this may be a useful concept in relation to young offenders, encouraging researchers to allow space to explore what it may mean for them to be confronted with the harm they have caused or to realise the extent of their dependence on drugs.

Using these constructs of autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) and self-event relations (Pasupathi et al., 2007), McLean (2008) examined differences in the life narratives of young people (17-35 years) and older people (65-85 years). In objective terms, both groups were undergoing change by virtue of their life-stage, for example, physically, cognitively and in social relationships and roles. McLean was interested in how individuals integrated experiences into their identity and whether the self-event connections they made as they recounted a series of self-defining memories in interview would represent personal continuity or personal change. Previous research had suggested that older people tend to assimilate rather than to accommodate change, emphasising stability and 'sameness in change' (Pasupathi et al., 2007). McLean further hypothesised that the young people in her sample would report more change connections and that these would relate to more recent autobiographical memories. As expected, the older participants tended to report more thematic coherence in their life stories and to relate their individual stories back to major life themes or metaphors using explanatory connections. What was not expected was that both groups were engaged in similar levels of reflective processing of life events (although notably females more than males in both age groups). McLean, however, suggests that reflection may serve different functions for each group:

'For younger people, narrative appears to provide a means for self-exploration and self-understanding, and for older people, it appears to provide a means for stability and resolution.' (McLean, 2008:262)

So young people as they encounter new events and social relations need to add these episodes to their life stories, evaluating their salience and choosing appropriate self-event connections (Pasupathi et al., 2007). And identities as constructed through narratives may be changed as a result of experiences that are formative or else of the 'reveal' type. The cognitive tools required for autobiographical reasoning and conceptual thinking typically develop in adolescence, allowing for more complex abstractions and interpretations of life events as they are retrospectively reconstructed to bolster self-continuity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). However, that is not the only aspect of development in adolescence; young people are also absorbing a range of cultural messages and accepted ways of framing and presenting stories, including the use of master narratives to structure reminiscence and as a potential tool for evaluation (Fivush et al., 2011). Their narrative repertoire and access

to cultural references and tropes to enhance stories may consequently extend and diversify. At the same time they become more skilled in the construction of stories and their constituent parts, such as plot, characterisation and resolution (Reissman, 2008: Daiute, 2014).

Of course, young people use narratives in a variety of ways that are not biographical, although they may still have a bearing on 'identity-in-the-making'. Bamberg argues that developed autobiographical accounts have been privileged in narrative research but "'Big Stories" are hardly everyday phenomena. They most often require elaborate elicitation techniques, precisely for the reason that they are not likely to be shared spontaneously' (2006:71). In contrast, exploration of identities constructed through 'small stories' embedded in everyday interactions, allows different insights and:

'[O]pens us up and urges us to scrutinise the inconsistencies, contradictions, moments of trouble and tension, and the teller's constant navigation and finessing between different versions of selfhood in local contexts.' (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008:394)

So rather than seeking coherence and authenticity in narratives, the researcher here focuses on the equivocations, ambiguities and complexities revealed in 'small-talk, chit-chat ...[and] small stories-in-interactions with the same participants but at different times and in different settings' (Bamberg, 2004:368). Although Bamberg (2004) suggests that turning attention to 'small stories' may be particularly beneficial in research with children and adolescents, an interesting example of combining big and small stories in research exists at the other end of the age spectrum. Phoenix and Sparkes' (2009) study of positive identity change with age is based on the case of 'Fred' who was contacted by the researchers after they had seen a newspaper report of a football match that he organised to celebrate his 70th birthday. Major overarching themes emerging from Fred's life history interviews included 'life is what you make it', 'being leisurely' and 'keeping fit'. Supplemented by insights from informal interactions concerning health, daily routines and engagement with health and fitness media (such as magazines), this formed a rich data set allowing multiple perspectives on what growing old meant to Fred. The authors thus argue for the benefits of similar combined approaches which may indeed be valuable in narrative research with young people where it may be impractical or inappropriate to rely solely on biographical interviews.

Capturing young people's narratives

The 'small stories' approach is based on a performative view of identity construction through narrative whilst other orientations to narrative research are underpinned by interest in internal psychosocial development. Whatever view is taken of the dynamic between narrative and identity, research methods that encourage young people's active participation are likely to produce richer material than those where young people are treated as the object of research. While this is recognised in criminological research with young people, it is researchers in other disciplines who have sought imaginative ways of involving young people and have explored new opportunities offered, for example, by visual media and mobile methods. However, creative enthusiasm should be balanced with

careful thought about what is most appropriate for the age and developmental stages of the young people concerned. Pertinent to this, Punch (2002a) asks whether research with children is the same or different to research with adults, warning against the dangers of bracketing all children together as 'not adult' without recognition of their diversity.

Age being one critical dimension of that diversity, it is important that research design keys into the particular level of cognitive skills and competences, for example in autobiographical reasoning, that young people might bring to the research process. And, of course, young people may also have accumulated a range of social, technical and other skills that they can draw upon. Providing opportunities to use these existing skills and to master new ones may be key tools for engagement. Innovative methods may be helpful in this endeavour although 'the benefits and drawbacks of using them are not always scrutinised. A reflexive and critical approach is needed in order to recognise their disadvantages and limits, as well as the reasons for using them' (Punch, 2002a:330). The studies cited here all exemplify such qualities of reflexivity in research design, implementation and analysis. One central concern throughout is the attempt to reduce the power differential between (adult) researcher and (young) participants, a range of different activities being devised with this in mind.

Many young people keep diaries as a matter of course, reflecting the genesis of biographical interest in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). It is therefore not surprising that diaries in various formats have been developed for research purposes, allowing participant control of data within basic perimeters set by the researcher. A ground-breaking example of this was developed for the longitudinal biographical study, *Inventing Adulthoods* (Henderson et al., 2007) in the form of 'memory books' (Thomson & Holland, 2005). The research team's ideas for this method came from a number of sources which included the therapeutic use of 'memory boxes' with children. Their shared interest in the theory and practice of 'memory work' led them to collect together their own memories, realising from this process that the significant memories recalled may well differ from consciously narrated selves. Therefore:

'In the memory books we hoped that asking young people to document themselves though the collection of *memorable material*, away from the demands of the direct interview situation (more or less in privacy, engaging in a different mode of time) might facilitate the production of different and complementary constructions of self.' (2005:204)

Three striking aspects of this research practice are worth noting. First, the research team themselves each compiled a memory book over 3 months before consulting young people involved in the research about the final format. A review of these books illustrated the diverse ways that the task could be interpreted and carried out, alerting them to the variety in memory books that they might anticipate from their participants. Second, some young people given the 'raw materials' - a notebook, folder, glue, stickers with trigger words, a disposable camera and a basic set of instructions - chose to create a reflective diary, others assembled more of a scrap book containing images and memorabilia. And there was also variation in how far the memory books were employed as an interactive tool: some became collective projects or were shown to family and friends, in contrast to

those where young people's private thoughts were shared only with the researcher. In this respect there is evidence of both 'doing identity' through this task and, in other cases, taking a more reflective approach to experiences. Third, the memory books gave insights into aspects of everyday life, interactions and 'small stories' that may not have surfaced in a standard interview, and were thus used as the basis of the second round of *Inventing Adulthood* interviews as well as being copied and retrospectively analysed in their own right (Thomson & Holland, 2005).

One of the questions that arose as young people crafted their memory books is that of audience (Thomson & Holland, 2005). This was also pertinent in Worth's (2009) analysis of using audio-diaries with visually impaired young people as a follow up to an earlier face to face interview. Her intention was to further explore the participants' experiences of transition and the significance of the 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991) that they had identified in their lives. Referring to Latham's (2003) suggestion that the diary itself becomes a kind of performance that draws on the diarist's narrative resources, she was sensitised to the ways that young people spoke to the diary, sometimes explicitly addressing the researcher or using conversational tactics to engage her. Interestingly, because participants had freedom in how they used the audio-diary, some did so in unexpected ways; for example, one young person chose to talk about his confidence and positive feelings about independence indirectly through the device of giving advice to the parent of a visually impaired child. Yet, although the diary methods were valuable and certainly had appeal for the young people, the critical ingredient in encouraging their 'one-sided conversations' was a sense of having an audience. That in turn was dependent on having a sufficiently strong researcher-participant relationship already established through earlier interviews (Worth, 2009).

A slightly different approach was taken by Bagnoli (2004) in her study of young people (16-25 years) and migration in Italy and England. Here she combined a short structured 7 day diary with visual techniques, such as the creation of a self-portrait in the initial interview and selection of a single personal photograph, which together enabled participants to construct their multi-layered autobiographical narratives. Elsewhere, Bagnoli (2009) again used self-portraits as part of interviews with younger participants, then in later meetings added timelines and relational maps through which young people were able to describe their significant relationships. Similar to Punch's (2002a) use of drawings with children in Bolivia, these activities simply required blank paper and pencils or pens. Other visual methods, of course, rely much more on technology such as cameras or videos. These can be used either in researcher-led ways to provide stimulus material (Punch, 2002b; Kearns, 2014) or to record parts of the research process (McLeod, 2003). Alternatively they might be used in participant-led ways, as a creative tool for young people. And these may well be combined with the mobile methods explored in the next section.

Reflections on context, space and place

For Jenkins (1996) social identity is definitively embodied, not least because individuals possess bodily characteristics such as gender or physical ability/impairment that affect social relations and identifications. The embodied self also exists in particular social and physical spaces, which for young people may include the institutional spaces of schools

and other places where they engage in activities and social relations (Hopkins, 2010). With adolescence being the first time that young people negotiate public space on their own, Cahill speaking from Lower East Side, Manhattan, argues that how they:

'[D]efine their environmental transactions is intimately bound with the way in which they construct their identities. In these interactions, environmental experiences are a means of reflecting upon, reproducing and transforming the self.' (Cahill, 2000:251)

Understandably, then, researchers have looked beyond the standard interview context as they seek to enter young people's worlds and explore their relationships with space and place. While studies of this type are less focused on (auto) biography they are still concerned with developing narratives to interrogate the ways that young people construct identity-in-context and the meanings that places have for them. And they tap into methods that provide richer insights into multi-sensory experiences because:

'More creative and interactive methods are able to include objects, events and the respondent's whole body and senses in generating knowledge and communicating a place...Especially methods that can be used 'in the field' enabled research participants to communicate place by using their senses (olfactory, tactile, auditory, visual).' (Trell & Van Hoven, 2010:101)

Of course, space can be loaded with meaning for young people, but specific spaces can also represent safe territory. This latter potential has been exploited by Ross et al. (2009) in an ethnographic study of 8 young people involved in the care system. One key element of data collection in the (Extra)-ordinary Lives project came from interactions in routine car journeys as young people were driven to and from the project's fortnightly sessions. These, often interrupted, partial conversations were particularly interesting as research encounters; the primary attention of the researcher/driver was on the road so removing pressure and allowing the young person to control the timing and types of stories and intimate details shared. The dimensions of the power relationship also changed with familiarity. This was particularly so on occasions where the young person was directing the route, perhaps a diversion to pass a place that held associations, or choosing music to play, both being examples of 'negotiation of a shared experiential journey' (2009:608).

Shared journeys also featured in the research in the form of 'guided' walks, in some cases recorded on video or audio. These allowed the young person to choose the route taken, literally around his or her local environment, and figuratively in terms of the course of narratives. The conversations thus generated differed from those in more static settings because the conversation itself was only one element of the experience:

'[T]he people, places and things passed and sounds, sights, smells and so forth of these encounters...Walking with young people through their everyday locales triggered the sharing of narratives from the mundane to the intimate and significant, the rhythm of the journey creating a context through which young people could pace the sharing of their narratives.' (Ross et al., 2009:614)

The multi-sensory nature of mobile methods is also captured in a social geography study in Cedar, Vancouver Island (Trell & Van Hoven, 2010) which, again, employed a variety of media. This was a 9 month project, one part of which involved each of the four 17 year old participants in planning a walk around the village, enabling the researcher to experience each young person interacting with the environment. Through the walks, young people identified places that were significant to them, where they spent time and where they socialised. In a different element of the project, this data was supplemented by creation of 'mental maps' where participants created additional (and perhaps contrary) representations of spaces, objects and events important to them. These methods, alongside photography and film-making, produced rich data, whilst at the same time the project empowered the young people through its participatory approach and opportunities to enhance skills (for example, in conducting interviews and editing film) (Trell & Van Hoven, 2010).

Empowerment of participants is often a key aim of mobile methods, similar to visual methods, because the range of activities that fall within its scope allows potential for young people to take control of the research process and/ or its products. They can be adapted according to the needs of the participants and used for populations that are otherwise marginalised or excluded (Murray, 2009). For example, Shepherd (2015) interviewed young people with varying degrees of autism spectrum condition whilst walking around the campus to explore their experiences of transition from special school to college. For criminologists, these might well prove valuable in exploring young people's experiences of youth justice settings and institutions. And these approaches may be particularly fruitful when used in combination with other creative or visual methods to enable young people to construct narratives of self in their social and spatial context.

Researching with young people

Research itself is, of course, conducted in physical space: the location of research activity may be one critical difference between research with young people and with adults. As Hopkins notes 'Where research takes place often has significant implications for the nature of research interactions, the type of data collected and the comfort of the young people involved' (2010:331-2). It may be assumed that public space is more neutral than many other (adult dominated) settings but researchers need to be alert to territorial affiliations or the needs of young people who feel labelled and excluded from such spaces (Hopkins, 2010). Family homes may present difficulties in terms of privacy and confidentiality but for some purposes offer a safe environment for young people to talk (as well as perhaps being the focus of research, as in teenage bedroom culture). Researching within the educational and other institutions that young people are engaged with brings its own challenges. Punch (2002b), for example, found she had to work with the constraints of lesson times and the availability of private interview space in a school setting. Voluntary projects may present different context-specific factors to work around (Harris et al., 2014).

Working through institutions either to access young people or to provide the setting for research raises issues in two broad areas. The first relates to the need to be sensitive to the way that 'practices, values, behaviours and attitudes' (Hopkins, 2010:196) within the

institution might affect the research encounter. These might be positive, as in Punch's (2002a) research in Bolivia where teachers allowed the children to write research diaries in place of homework. But the aspirations of research to capture young people's authentic stories and to empower them in the research process may well be thwarted by institutional dynamics. This certainly could be a live issue in criminal justice settings where staff are accustomed to directing young people to activities and young people's agency (and ability to express their views) is tightly bounded (see, for example, Hazel et al., 2002)

This leads on to the second concern about the power to grant or to deny access. Although adult gatekeepers have no legal rights in terms of young people's decisions to participate in research, they may have other responsibilities in relation to well-being, for example, in a residential or secure setting (Wiles et al., 2005). While safeguards are important, the effect of paternalism or over-protectiveness may be to silence or exclude young people who are capable of giving their own consent (Alderson, 2004). This is particularly regrettable if decisions are made according to what is convenient for the institution not in the interest of the young person (or of the research for that matter!). Heath et al. (2009) also point to the opposite problem, where the institution grants the researchers access and the young person's consent is assumed, curtailing their right to opt out.

Morrow and Richards (1996) distinguish between consent and assent, which is altogether more passive and may be indicative of young people complying with the expectations of adults - parents or professionals - rather than their own wishes. They also note that:

'Ethics committee guidelines place great emphasis on obtaining informed consent - perhaps it would be more helpful to allow 'informed dissent' enabling children to refuse to participate in research, though again this will be complicated by discussions about age-related competence.' (1996:95)

Such discussions are indeed complex. As Heath et al. (2009) suggest, in the messiness of research practice it may never be possible to gain genuine fully informed consent. In fact, France (2004) argues that young people are more competent in this regard than often assumed and agrees with Christensen (1998) that researchers should operate on the basis of a *presumption of competence*. For under-16s, the capacity to consent is established by the common law ruling in *Gillick v W. Norfolk and Wisbech AHA 1985* which held that a child who has sufficient understanding could consent to medical treatment and that a parent of such a child has no right to override the child's consent. This decision is taken to apply to other areas relating to children (Masson, 2004) including participation in research. That said, determining whether a child has 'sufficient understanding', as with so many ethical questions, is a judgement call, and dependent on assessment of maturity and other factors relevant to the specific young person. Nevertheless, wherever appropriate, allowing the young person to exercise agency by expressing or withholding consent is preferable to parental consent. Indeed, parental consent may preclude some sensitive areas of research, for example, around sexual identity and behaviours where a young person has not 'come out' to his or her family (Heath et al., 2009).

There are further tricky questions around confidentiality and anonymity. For example, it is often seen as good ethical practice to ask research participants to sign written consent forms. Yet this may be problematic with hard-to-reach groups such as asylum-seekers or runaways, and perhaps young people involved in drugs or offending too (Wiles et al., 2005; Heath et al., 2009). Young people may also have strong feelings about how data is stored and how findings are later disseminated. This means it is often pragmatic to treat consent as an on-going process that needs to be renewed at successive stages (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Particularly where studies are long-term or using creative methods, it may not be possible to anticipate in advance how the research might develop (or, for example, how a young person might react to the way that he or she is portrayed on film). Regular checks are helpful to ensure that each young participant is comfortable with the data generated and how it will be interpreted and used. It should also be noted that researchers using photography or video may encounter additional problems with anonymity because people and places may be recognisable from images produced in the research (Heath et al., 2009).

Young people appreciate open and transparent relationships, and will be encouraged to participate in research if they feel that is the type of research relationship on offer. Researchers have responsibilities, of course, not to work in ways that oppress or harm their participants, and also the additional moral duties that any adult has towards young people (Morrow & Richards, 1996). This means that there may be limits to the confidentiality that the researcher can offer if a young person discloses that he or she is at risk of harm or other indicators of risk come to light. Such situations may be relatively rare, but issues such as disclosure of offences should be anticipated in research design, with clear policy and practice to be followed should they arise (France, 2004). An essential part of this should be clarity at the stage when consent is sought that confidentiality cannot be absolute. Even so the researcher may have choices if faced with a risk of harm issue:

'Depending on the context, nature of the disclosure, age of the child, relationship of child to researcher, perhaps the most helpful solution in such situations is for the researcher to discuss with the child what strategy they would like to pursue.' (Morrow & Richards, 2004:98)

As well as doing no harm, research that offers some benefit to young people is more likely to motivate them to participate. It is also worth bearing in mind that young people may be encouraged when they perceive that their contribution to research or consultation may make a difference. Relatedly, Hill notes that 'young people are primarily out-come orientated. When asked their views they expect a response. Many are disappointed or disillusioned when nothing happens afterwards' (2006:72). Where young people have discussed positive experiences of taking part in research they have suggested that they found it offered opportunities for learning/ self-development, that it had therapeutic value (Kearns, 2014), that it was empowering or sometimes just enjoyable in itself (Punch, 2002b). Furthermore, feedback from children 5-15 years in focus groups and through questionnaires (Hill, 2006) has suggested that they value research designed in ways that they see as fair and that offers variety and choice to cater for different tastes and temperaments. They want to feel comfortable and respected in their involvement. These

all seem helpful characteristics for qualitative research seeking young people's narratives. Yet they may present some challenges in criminal justice settings, particularly where there are constraints in terms of physical space or young people's movements.

Analysing narratives or narrative analysis?

Stories by their very nature are individual creations. They are also often situated in specific time and social contexts. Conventional research criteria of validity and reliability prove difficult for narrative research because of the variability of stories told and the subjectivity involved in selecting from and interpreting what may be extensive data (Lieblich et al., 1998). Narrative researchers, in seeking good practice, may therefore look for the alternative qualities of trustworthiness and authenticity in their participants' accounts (Heath et al., 2009). And this extends to the analysis of the narrative as well, in effect the story as told by the researcher (Reissman, 2008). Of course, there may be multiple ways of interpreting any given narrative. The researcher might focus on the overall structure of the narrative or parts of it, looking at elements such as plot, characterisation and the problems or complicating actions that move the story along and require resolution (Reissman, 2008). Alternatively, the researcher may trace themes within the narrative, concentrating on content rather than form (Lieblich et al., 1998). And there are many ways of linking stories and finding connections (see for example, Thomson and Holland, 2003). What is important is not that the analysis is objectively 'true' but that it is credible based on the source material and brings coherence and meaning to the stories:

'In the final analysis, good narrative research persuades readers. [Researchers] can present their narratives in ways that demonstrate the data are genuine and analytical interpretations of them are plausible, reasonable and convincing.' (Reissman, 2008:191)

This is especially significant in youth research because of the dangers of allowing an adult world view to dominate analysis (or even skewing the earlier stage of data collection) (Punch, 2002a). Mobile, visual and other methods may help reduce this risk by opening space for young people to express feelings or explore their experiences. However, it would be naïve to expect this to happen automatically. A number of practical problems, such as young people's lack of technical skills, may impact on the type and quality of data (Heath et al., 2009). So care and realistic expectations are needed at the design stage.

Good research design should also give the researcher scope to seek the young person's reflections and interpretations of the data generated, and to check out his or her own provisional analyses with the young person. This, admittedly, demands time and effort which may be in short supply. Another difficulty is that images produced by young people may be treated as data in their own right, but interpreting them in isolation could leave the researcher a hostage to fortune and at risk of misunderstanding the significance of what is being represented and how. Some images may recur simply because of the time of year when photographs were taken or because they are intrinsically attractive rather than having any deeper resonance (Punch, 2002a). Encouraging explanation and using images as a means of eliciting a more diverse range of stories may be more valuable,

especially where images are of aspects of the young person's world that the researcher would not otherwise have access to.

And what else do we need to think about?

It is almost a truism to say that a good level of communication is essential in researching with young people. By definition, most researchers are adult and attached to educational institutions, which means that they start from a position of power relative to young people (Heath et al., 2009). This may be further complicated by other aspects of identity. Class, ethnicity and sexual orientation, for example, may be markers of difference or possibly sameness and so a potential point of identification. The social position and characteristics of the researcher affect all aspects of the research process. Berger's (2013) experience is particularly instructive on this point: in the course of conducting a study of step-families, she became a step-parent herself which moved her from the position of 'outsider' to 'insider' with new knowledge and experience that caused her to examine her earlier biases and assumptions. Of course, everyone has been young at some time but experiences of 'youth' are so diverse (and specific to time period) that Heath et al. (2009) doubt that this in itself confers any real 'insider' status. So at the very least researchers are likely to be working across an age divide and may well have other aspects of difference to bridge. This suggests that actively listening - being alert and responsive - must be a vital part of the youth researcher skill set. While that might sound obvious, culturally adults are not attuned to listening to young people who in turn may not be used to being listened to (Punch, 2002a). This may, then, prove more of a challenge than it appears on the face of it.

Hill (2006) notes that young people rarely come into the research process with an entirely clean slate, the likelihood being that they have been asked for their views in educational, community or other contexts. Previous poor experiences of feedback or consultation exercises may mean that researchers have to work very hard to gain young people's trust and more than a token level of engagement. Young people, moreover, may respond to certain types of interviews and direct questioning by seeking to supply the 'right answers' to the adult interviewer, particularly in settings such as schools (Heath et al., 2009), where they may feel this is a cultural expectation. More open invitations to discussion and the telling of stories may be productive but two caveats should be borne in mind. First, that young people do vary in their abilities and readiness to create narratives and may feel uncomfortable in interviews that offer no focus or structure. Second, some young people are only too accustomed to having to tell youth justice workers and other professionals about their lives and may give a well-rehearsed story or be reluctant to give any at all. The innovative methods earlier discussed may not be a total panacea but may offer some means of addressing these issues.

This brings us back to the thorny question of power relations and the influence of the adult researcher across the whole research endeavour. This is especially acute in longitudinal studies where young people and researchers meet on numerous occasions over an extended period. This sort of long-term view is invaluable in looking at change over time and particularly in transitions research. But it brings its challenges and demands of the researcher a high degree of reflexivity. Turning again to the *Inventing Adulthoods*

study (Henderson et al., 2007), the research team considered how their presence in young people's lives might influence or change their course:

'We neither sought to make an intervention into young people's lives, nor denied that we might be doing so. Our decision to ensure a continuity of interviewer over time was both pragmatic and guided by a concern with the quality of the research relationship. We recognised that it is not a "normal" part of young people's lives to be invited to participate in regular in-depth interviews by researchers from a university, and that impact of the research process would have to be addressed in the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. Throughout the research process we have attempted to make space for young people to talk about the impact of the research process on them.' (Thomson & Holland, 2003:239)

This, then, recognises the importance of relationships at successive stages of the research process and sees carefully considered relationships and subjectivities as virtue, not weakness. This was also a feature of the 12-18 Project in which Lyn Yates and Julie McLeod collected data from young people at 6 monthly intervals between 1993 and 2000 (McLeod, 2003). They encouraged participants' reflexivity by using devices such as hypothetical questioning in interviews throughout the project (as an aside, they note that this worked better with middle class young women than working class boys). Interestingly, at the end of the project, each young person was given a compilation video with excerpts of their previous interviews and they were able to watch this at home and then talk about their reactions (McLeod, 2003). Moreover, the longitudinal nature of the research in itself encouraged researcher reflexivity because of the range of data produced and the multiple ways that it could be interpreted, compared and contrasted over time, representing

'[N]ot so much a form of "triangulation" as an archive of perspectives from different periods of time and vantage-points, one that provides a rich and comparative basis for understanding patterns of continuity and change in identity.' (McLeod, 2003:202)

Conclusion

Criminology has long nurtured interest in young people and their behaviours, but only too often the 'problem' is framed by adults and takes little account of the views of young people. Recent studies have sought to redress this imbalance (see for example, France et al., 2012; McAra & McVie, 2012; Sharpe, 2012, on 'offending girls'). But on the whole criminologists have not exploited the deep potential of the creative and innovative methods outlined in this article. And there have been remarkably few longitudinal studies allowing young people to unravel their complex biographies and their entanglements in crime (one notable exception being Halsey and Deegan's (2015) 10 year study of 14 young offenders in South Australia that is reviewed elsewhere in this journal).

Why this is the case is perhaps the subject of another article. But there is a compelling argument for criminologists researching with young people to extend their

methodological range in the attempt to capture a greater diversity of stories and to probe the connections between youthful biographies and criminal involvements. The ways that researchers in other disciplines have opened up young people narratives can surely be transferred to criminological questions about young people's behaviours and relationships, and the meanings that these hold for them. Could behaviours viewed negatively by adults - as aggressive, rebellious, resistant or overtly sexual - be viewed differently by young people as a means of defining themselves and using the limited agency they have in the face of adversity? Ungar (2004) certainly identifies 'hidden resilience' in some of these behaviours, seeing signs of strengths and social competencies, even where they are woefully misapplied. Yet it is only by allowing young people to tell their stories - big or small - that we can explore shared understandings.

And, finally, criminologists must inevitably be concerned with the ways that official agencies - the youth justice system being only the latest in a long line for many 'young offenders' - interact and intervene in young people's lives. These interactions and interactions reverberate through the lives of troubled young people. But how and to what effect, will never be known unless the will is there to question conventional accounts of criminal careers. These young people may not be easy to engage in research for reasons outlined earlier, and, even by adolescent standards, may create partial or fragmented stories. Yet surely we should try to hear and to respond with wisdom and compassion to what they tell us.

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