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Methodological challenges in conducting qualitative longitudinal studies with “vulnerable groups” of young people.

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Giving control to young people: the use they make of our tools.

Hélène Join-Lambert, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense (France)

helene.join-lambert@u-paris10.fr

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Full text

Introduction

The ELTA (Everyday Lives: (Re)Conceptualising Transitions to Adulthood for Young People in Care) project was funded under the FP7-Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowships actions and conducted at the University of Sussex together with Janet Boddy and Rachel Thomson, from September 2013 till august 2014. A main objective of this project was a methodological experimentation designed to examine the everyday lives of 16 young people in care in France and England. The aim was first, to capture their experiences of everyday, how it relates to future plans, and how it is embedded in different national contexts, and second, to experience methods for a follow-up longitudinal research in different countries. The methods included drawing maps of places which are important in their everyday life, taking the interviewer for a guided walk, making pictures with a digital camera which was given to them, and talking about the pictures at the next interviews. So what was the result of this methodological experimentation?

After briefly giving the context and overall objectives of this research project, I will focus on the development of the methodological experimentation, on the approaches which were used to interview the young people, and more specifically on the young people's responses to these approaches. While the use young people made of them was not necessarily the one expected, it appears that these tools produced very rich data. Finally, I will discuss the way young people engaged with the research and how we can interpret the use they made of these methodological tools.

Context and objectives of the research

For young people placed away from home, risk of disadvantage is complex, encompassing experiences *before, during* and *after* placement. At the same time, children in care comprise a heterogeneous groupⁱ and understanding outcomes depends on attention to difference. Evidence of disadvantage for young people from care does not mean that placement *per se* is the problem. In England *and* France, an increasing body of work shows the potential *benefits* of placement, and the risks associated with return home or with failing to place children when necessary ^{ii, iii}. Children in care have diverse needs and characteristics ^{iv}, and whole population indicators are not appropriate for understanding individual experiences and life trajectories. To understand how best to support *individual* outcomes requires close attention to individual lives.

Placement remains a necessary protective intervention for the upbringing a significant minority of children and young people in European society, although there is evidence that placement services are conceptualised differently across Europe. Boddy and colleagues' cross-national research has shown differences between England and other European countries (including France) in the extent to which placement is seen as a failure or last resort, or as a social pedagogic intervention, an opportunity to create a '*cadre de vie*', or environment for life^v. Perhaps the most critical question facing public care is of how to ensure that the system functions to create an appropriate environment to support young people on their journeys into adult life. Researching this challenge requires a shift in perspective, from systems analysis to a biographical approach to personal sequences of events and experiences^{vi}.

Policy and professional concern about adult outcomes for young people from care is mirrored by cross-national research evidence of the lack of support for young people in the transition to adulthood^{vii, viii}. In Canada, Goyette (2007, 92)^{ix} evaluated a programme designed to support the transition from foster care to adulthood, concluding that it had enabled professionals to become 'more sensitive to the issues involved in matters of their preparation for independent living.' This sensitivity requires holistic attention the biographical experiences of 'growing up', beyond domain-specific outcome indicators. How can placement address the substantive historic disadvantages faced by children entering the care system? How can public care systems enable resilience to historic disadvantage in young people's lives, and attend to their social pedagogic needs? The answer to these questions depends on attention to everyday lives, and everyday pedagogic practices in placement: on developing 'a subtle and situated understanding of how and why individuals and communities operate as they do' (Thomson 2007, 571)^x.

Attention to family, and to everyday family practices, is highly relevant for understanding young people's transitions from care to adulthood. Both birth families and substitute (foster or institutional) care providers are potentially of practical importance as part of networks that support young people leaving care and going on with adult lives. Most people entering adulthood benefit from family support until at least their mid 20s^{xi}. Such support is less accessible, and more problematic, for young people leaving care: autonomy arrives more quickly, and abruptly, than

for young people growing up within their family of origin^{xii, xiii}. Young people in care need support to ensure that their complex family relationships can either act as a positive resource and support, or, if that is not possible, can be effectively managed into adult life.

No research had yet provided a close analysis of links between everyday experiences in public care and the experience of transition to adulthood. Holland and colleagues'^{xiv} participatory research richly illuminated the daily lives of young people in public care in the UK, but this research was not cross-national, nor was it longitudinal. Researchers studying transitions from care to adulthood, and those who have studied adults who were in care as children reveal concern about lack of support in preparation for adult life, but have not looked in detail at upbringing environments, at daily lives and relationships within placement.

The objectives of this project were to

1. Conduct a critical review of international literature on transitions to adulthood: (a) for young people in care; and (b) within interdisciplinary childhood and youth studies.
2. Develop a case study methodology and narrative analytic framework for the study of everyday lives and relationships amongst young people in public care.
3. Conduct a comparative narrative analysis of case studies derived from new research with young people in public care in England and equivalent archived data from a research with young people in the general population (the *Inventing Adulthoods* research^{xv})
4. Conduct a comparative study of young people placed away from home in England and France, to examine the connections between narratives of everyday lives and relationships (including family and substitute carers), and perceptions of identity, agency, aspirations and transitions to adulthood;
5. Establish a sample in England and France for future longitudinal research and conducting preliminary longitudinal follow-up; and
6. Devise an appropriate methodology and funding proposal for a longitudinal cross-European study of the relationship between everyday lives in public care and transitions to adulthood.

Methodological approaches to the young people

This presentation will focus on the case study methodology which was developed to study the everyday lives and relationships amongst young people in public care. Within this project, case studies of 16 young people in care have been conducted in England and France.

The methodology was derived from the literature review and from Janet Boddy's and Rachel Thomson's previous research. It included activities like social mapping, guided walks, and digital photos.

The purposes were (a) to get young people to choose the topics, places, people, and objects relevant in their everyday lives, that they wanted to talk about, (b) to make this research experience enjoyable and interesting to them and (c) to keep in touch with them over time. Before proceeding with the data collection, consultations were held with six other young people having experienced care in France and in England, and with Emily Munro, a researcher who is an expert in transitions from care to adulthood and who gave advice on ethical aspects of the methodology.

The first step was to make *consultation interviews* with six young people who had experienced care and were asked to comment on the methods we planned to use for the actual data collection. These interviews were conducted in December 2013 (France) and January 2014 (England). This gave us some helpful ideas about how young people might react to the methods we were planning to use, and how to adapt our methods. Each step of the planned methodology (see below) has been discussed with each of them.

The use of cameras and of texting raised most comments among the young people who participated in the consultations. Making pictures of their everyday lives is a usual practice among young people; they take lots of pictures of themselves and of friends with their mobile phones. They did suggest giving young people paper copies of the pictures, which would be convenient to look at in a few years, rather than memory sticks, which need a computer to look at them. French consultants raised the issue of the possession of the camera, saying that young people might lose it or sell it or get it stolen... The idea of giving it to them as a present was seen as positive: *"You should tell them about this to start with, so you'll get a lot of pictures"*. Interestingly, this was not seen as an issue by the English young people: *"like I am responsible with all my stuff I would make sure it's like safe and not broken and in a safe place where I know where it is and I wouldn't lend it out to anyone."*

Outline of what the research might involve

- First step: Get in contact + seek for consent from the young person + their carer + social worker
- **Meeting 1 with young person:**
 - I will give young people information about the study and what it involves and ask them for agreement to take part,
 - I will ask them to draw a map of places in their life - places they go, places they like and places they don't like or avoid, and places that are important to them
 - I will ask them to take me on a guided walk to important places in their life (in and/or outside the place where the young person lives) ,
 - I will give them a digital camera and ask them to take pictures to show me their life over the course of a week
 - I will ask for a telephone number I can use to contact them and how to get in touch with their carer
 - We will talk about next steps and arrange the next meeting in 1 week.
- **Meeting 2 with young person**
 - We'll meet about a week after the first interview, at a time chosen by the young person
 - I will bring a computer so we can look at pictures taken by the young person, and I will ask them to talk about these pictures
 - I will help the young person (if needed) to edit a virtual book that they can keep on a memory stick
 - We will talk about next steps, and about the best way to send feedback to them
 - I will leave the camera with them
- **Interview with their carer, with young person's permission**
 - I will give carers information about the study and what it involves and ask them for agreement to take part,
 - Ask questions about things they do together with young person, but also other daily activities of young person, places they go to, people they like or don't like to meet, etc.
- 3 months after interview 1 I will call the young person to check their number, and make an appointment for next week.
- In the meanwhile I will
 - text them 3 times a day during 7 days,
 - send a message that says "please take a picture of this moment with the camera (or alternatively respond to the text)"
 - I will give them telephone credit when we meet at the end of the week
- **Meeting 3 with young person:**
 - I will give feedback on the French- English research, and see if the young person has any comments or amendments,
 - We will
 - have another look at the virtual book we made during the last meeting
 - look at pictures taken during the last week
 - look at texts sent to me by the young person during the last week
 - we will talk about the next steps and the next meeting in a year, and how to keep in touch.
- **In august 2014: I will give Feedback** on the results to all the participants
 - By text,
 - By Email,
 - Through the English/French Website <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/esw/circy/projects/everydaylives>
 - Other? Twitter?

The initial idea of texting was to ask young people three times a day, during a week, to make a picture of what's happening at that moment. This was very much criticised in the consultation interviews, in France and in England. It felt too intrusive, young people could feel obliged, and if they were at school at that moment they could take it as an excuse to make pictures instead of listening to the teacher. Or the text could come at the wrong moment, where you really don't want to make a picture. So as a result of the consultation, the idea of texting was changed mainly into a way of making appointments and staying in touch with the young people who gave me their mobile number. Also, the initial idea of asking carers for their consent before interviewing young people was changed, so carers were asked for informed consent only in order to give an interview themselves.

Iterative piloting was planned to be conducted in January 2014, but because it took much longer than expected to get in touch with potential young participants, the interviews which started in February 2014 were taken into the main sample for data-collection. As a consequence, the first interviews were also used to adjust the way in which instructions were given to young people.

Development of the project

Within this project, case studies of 16 young people in care have been conducted in England and France, including four interviews with each young person within a time frame of six to 12 weeks and one with their carer. Altogether, 74 interviews were conducted between December 2013 and September 2014. The last interviews were conducted beyond the end of the project and so the narrative analysis is still in progress.

The *methodological development* included interviews based on social mapping, guided walks, and digital photos as supports for narrative interviews, and texting as a way of keeping in touch. Social mapping consisted of drawing a map with places which are important in one's everyday life, while commenting on these places. Guided walks were made to a place chosen by the young person, which is important to them, and enables the interviewer to ask for more narratives on their everyday life. Pictures were made with a digital camera handed out to the young person during the first interview. The camera is a gift which can be kept after the end of the research. Young people chose what they want to make pictures of, and at the next interview they showed the pictures, or some of them, and commented on them to describe what is important in their everyday life. Texting was one of the ideas developed in order to keep in touch with young people between the rounds of interviews, and in the future (see above the document 'case study methodology'). Additionally, facebook contact turned out to be useful with some of the participants.

Table 1: Overview of the data collection with young people (Feb.- Sept. 2014)

	map	walk	Pics 1	Pics 2	carer
Kimber (girl 14 residential)	30.4.	4.06.	4.06.	3.07.	3.07.
Britney (girl 14 residential)	30.04.	4.06.	4.06.	3.07.	3.07.
Marie (girl 16 foster)	11.06.	11.06.	23.06.	28.07.	14.06.
Emilie (girl 16 foster)	14.06.	23.06.	23.06.	8.07.	14.06.
Druidsphere (boy 14 foster)	14.06.	25.06.	25.06.	23.07.	25.06.
Angel (boy 15 foster)	16.06.	27.06.	27.06.	29.08.	
Hermionne (girl 14 foster)	18.06.	13.09.	13.09.		13.09.
Anne (girl 16 foster)	21.06.	21.06.	27.06.	26.08.	21.06.
Lucy (16 foster care)	16.02.	21.02	21.02	6.05.	21.02.
Mary (16 foster care)	19.03.		3.04.		19.06.
Sophie (14 foster care)	18.02.	5.03.	5.03.	22.05.	5.03
Nicola (16 foster care)	12.03.	25.03.	25.03.		
Sarah (16 residenbtial care)	17.02	17.02			
Paul (16 foster care)	14.03.	14.03.	28.03.		7.04.
Alfie (16 foster care)	26.02.	7.03.	7.03.	9.05.	9.05.
Alexander (18, supported lodging)	21.03.	11.04.	11.04.	22.05.	

In the following, I will analyse more specifically one of the tools which were experimented: the pictures.

At the beginning of the first individual meeting with each young person, information about the purposes of the research, the rights of the participants, and the tasks included in their participation, were explained to them in all details. Although they all had received an information sheet and part of them had attended information meetings, these reminders were crucial in order to make sure that they had understood the implications of their participation, before signing the consent sheet.

After this, the recorded interview would start with the help of the social mapping, where they were asked to draw places which are important in their everyday life, and to talk about them. This was a good way to give them an understanding of what I wanted to talk about. In four cases, the guided walk took place immediately after the mapping. At the end of the first meeting, young people were given digital cameras with memory cards and batteries, and were asked to make pictures of things, people, and places which were important in their everyday life. They were asked to bring the camera to the next meeting in order to show me the pictures of their choice and to talk about them. In case they wanted to make pictures of other people, they needed to ask these for permission before showing the pictures to me.

Young people's responses

All but one participant accepted to meet at least a second time, and out of these 15, 13 showed some pictures at the second meeting. These pictures had been taken on the research-camera in 12 cases, and on their mobile phones in one case. The two others talked about 'virtual pictures'.

11 young people accepted to meet a third time. Having experienced a meeting where the young person had forgotten to bring their camera, I then systematically reminded the young people per text to bring their camera to the meeting. However, only six young people actually showed me pictures on the research-camera the second time. One more showed pictures from their mobile phone, and four didn't show any pictures.

The three young people who didn't bring the camera to the second meeting didn't bring it to the third one either. So out of the 15 cameras I had handed out at the first interviews, there were three which I never saw again.

Table 2: Types and numbers of pictures

	pictures 1	number of pictures	pictures 2	number of pictures
Kimber (girl 14 residential)	virtual pictures	3	no pictures	
Britney (girl 14 residential)	camera + older pictures	3 + dozens	no pictures	
Marie (girl 16 foster)	camera	28	camera	274 + 4 videos
Emilie (girl 16 foster)	camera	20 + 3	camera	12
Druidsphere (boy 14 foster)	camera	5	camera	1
Angel (boy 15 foster)	virtual pictures	3	mobile phone	14
Hermionne (girl 14 foster)	camera	11	x	
Anne (girl 16 foster)	camera	31	no pictures	
Lucy (16 foster care)	camera	12	camera	8
Mary (16 foster care)	camera	22	x	
Sophie (14 foster care)	camera	5	camera	1
Nicola (16 foster care)	mobile phone	22	x	
Sarah (16 residential care)	x		x	
Paul (16 foster care)	camera	8	x	
Alfie (16 foster care)	camera	1	camera	3
Alexander (18, supported lodging)	camera	23	no pictures	

Pictures taken with the camera

The number of pictures young people took with the 'research-camera' ranged from 1 to 274 for each meeting. In cases when there were too many pictures to look at in the frame of the interview, I asked them to choose the ones which they wanted to talk about. The topics of the pictures were varied. Sofas, beds and bedrooms were taken by 9 young people, while five took pictures of their school buildings, and bus stops appeared in three cases. Friends appeared only in two cases, while brothers and sisters were present in three cases and the foster families or young people from

the foster home also in three cases. Four young people didn't make pictures of people. But they took pictures which are closely linked to people who are important in their lives, for example presents from their mother, or the garden where they have parties with the foster parents. Several young people showed me pictures of themselves when they were small children: one English 14 years old girl had her picture hanging on the wall of her room, a French 14-years old girl had stored pictures of her childhood on a memory card which she allowed me to look at together with her during the interview.

At the end of the meetings, I asked young people if I could download their pictures on my laptop, in order to look at them together at the next interview and also to show them to my colleague. I also reminded them that I had promised not to publish any of these pictures in any way. I asked them whether they would like me to print some pictures for them to keep, and three young people responded to this.

The analysis of the pictures is underway, together with the analysis of the interviews where those pictures are being commented.

Virtual pictures

In two cases when young people didn't bring the camera, I asked them to describe the pictures they had taken, or the pictures they would have taken. This 'virtual picture' method appeared to be productive in both cases: one boy who had taken pictures but had forgotten to bring the camera to our meeting, saying that he thought his pictures were really not interesting; and one girl who said she didn't make the pictures because she thought since I was coming to her place for the meeting anyway, she'd better show me the rooms rather than making pictures of them. They mentioned three pictures each, with one of the three being the bed or the bedroom.

Angel (boy, 16) describes the two pictures he made, but did not bring to our meeting. The first one was his bed « *because my bed, it's my friend. My big friend for ever, even though it changes all the time.* » (15) The second picture he describes is the rabbit, which was in the garden at that moment because of the warm weather. He says that's all, he only took these two pictures. But then he says « *I could have made another picture of the garden: Because the garden, I play football and basketball and when the weather is nice, we have dinner in the garden. We chat and all the family is there.* » (22)

So although he didn't show me these pictures, the way he describes them says a lot about what is important in his everyday life, and is very valuable for the research. In a similar way, while we were going to the room where the interview would take place, Kimber (girl, 14) showed me the computer room, the living room, and her bedroom, where she pointed more specifically at her bed (there were two beds in the room) and at a picture of her beautiful mother hanging on the wall. She then commented on the importance of these places during the interview.

However, if I hadn't handed out the cameras, these two young people possibly wouldn't have anticipated about the pictures they wanted to take, so the camera did serve as a tool to get the descriptions of the virtual pictures as well.

Mobile phones

In the cases when young people used the mobile phone, it became clear that the pictures they showed me weren't made for the purpose of showing them to me. These were pictures taken as usual: pictures of themselves, of friends, relatives, the kind of pictures you want to keep with you. *"They always take pictures together"* (Nicola's friend talking about Nicola and her mum)

But also, there are pictures of *unusual* situations and places: " *Me: So this is half of you? Nicola: No, it's so you can get the horse in.*" In this case, the picture taken with the mobile phone is that of an unusual event in the girl's life, when she was next to a horse. When I ask her to get back to this picture to talk more about it, she doesn't talk about the horse (the unusual event), but about friendships (so something related to her everyday life):

"Me: Who's horse is it? Nicola: I don't know, it's just a random horse because my friend lives on xxx Farm and there was a horse. Nicola's friend: There's loads of horses there.

Me: What's the name of this friend? Nicola: Mary. Nicola's friend: We're not friends anymore. [...]

Me: So you were friends until last week and then you went out of friendship? Nicola: No, she's a shit stirrer. Nicola's friend: She causes trouble. Nicola: Say this is crap, like trouble, she sits there and does this.

Me: I see. Nicola's friend: Trouble, she stirs up trouble.

Me: And, so this is why you don't talk to her anymore? Nicola: Exactly, yes."

In this sequence we can understand that the picture of Nicola and a horse, which she took because it is untypical of her everyday life, gave rise to a discussion about the relationship with the former friend. This discussion highlights the importance of friendships in her everyday life, and therefore is absolutely relevant in the frame of the investigation.

The use young people make of the pictures stored in the mobile phones is the same in France and in England: they show them very quickly, jumping from one picture to the next, often not really giving me a chance to see it properly, let apart to ask questions about the link between the picture and everyday life. Like in this other discussion with Nicola:

"Nicola: Me, ready for my job interview.

Me: Wait a minute please, can you go back? Nicola: For my job interview.

Me: You're very beautiful. Nicola: Thanks.

Me: So when was that? Do you mind just taking them one after another so we can talk about each one?

Nicola: Wait, can I just show you this one?" (16)

Apart from the comments young people made on some of these pictures, what became evident, is that the use of the mobile phone is in itself a crucial part of their everyday life, just like making and showing pictures with it. The good thing about pictures is that you can make and show them even when you run out of credit.

Conclusions about young people's everyday lives

The way in which part of the young people addressed my demand to make pictures of their everyday life and to talk about them, was not always the way I had planned it. However, their reaction in itself is an indicator of their understanding of everyday life. To conclude, I would like to share two insights gained through this methodological experimentation.

The first one is linked to the little use they made of the cameras especially in the second phase (between the second and the third meeting). The explanation of this could be found in their perception of how uninteresting those pictures might be to show and to comment on. For them, the pictures they stored on their mobile phone were far more appropriate for these purposes. This is coherent with the perception we have of everyday life as something so normal we would not think of talking about it.^{xvi}

The second thought, deriving from this, is that pictures taken with the mobile phone are embedded in everyday life: young people make them to remember people, places and events which they liked or which have a special meaning to them. On the other hand, the pictures taken on the camera for the research were pictures about their usual life. It is interesting to emphasize here that we would not usually take pictures of what is usual. So while asking young people to take pictures of their everyday life, I was asking to do something which doesn't belong into their everyday life. And when they decided to show me pictures from their mobile phone instead, they were offering me to see what actually plays a great part in their everyday life.

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