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## From ethnography to life history: tracing transitions of school students

TUULA GORDON and ELINA LAHELMA<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper we explore the implications of conducting a longitudinal transitions study based on ethnographic research in secondary schools. The main issue we address is how the ethnographic starting point materialized into a longitudinal exploration of young people's transitions to adulthood. We discuss the process of the research and how the ethnographic study contextualizes the life history research, focusing on 'remembering' and 'imagining'. In our conclusions we address representations, in particular ethics and politics of writing. The article draws from a project *Tracing Transitions—Follow-up Study of Post-16 Students* in which we trace young people's transitions into further and higher education and the labour market.

In the project *Tracing Transitions—Follow-up Study of Post-16 Students* we trace young people's transitions into further and higher education and the labour market. We explore their aims, plans and practices, meanings attached to these, as well as the outcomes. We utilize a multilayered analysis whereby the life history exploration is embedded in, and grounded by, an earlier ethnographic study through which we can analyse economic, cultural and biographical as well as educational aspects in the paths pursued by young people. We trace ways in which these paths are intersected with social class, gender, ethnicity and locality. We follow the transitions of young people whom we met whilst doing ethnographic research in two schools in Helsinki, Finland, when they were aged around 13 through first transition interviews when the young women and men were around 18 and a second when they were around 20. A third will take place when they are around 22.

In this paper we explore the implications of conducting a longitudinal transitions study based on ethnographic research. The main issue we address is how the ethnographic starting point materialized into a longitudinal exploration of transitions. First we discuss our work in schools, second, how we conducted interviews and gathered other data, and third, we explore how the ethnographic study contextualizes our current life history research and provides a multilayered context for tracing young people's transitions. Finally, we focus on temporalities—'remembering' and 'imagining' in the

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context of processes, practices and meanings. In our conclusions we address representations, in particular the ethics and politics of writing. We suggest that whilst rapport is important in any research conducted with other people, in longitudinal ethnography with young women and men it is especially crucial.

### **Beginnings: at school**

Our study continues the work we undertook in the project *Citizenship, Difference and Marginality in Schools: With Special Reference to Gender*. This was a contextualized, collective, comparative and cross-cultural study that focused on the restructuring of education in Britain and Finland, particularly on curriculum policies, and on practices and processes in schools. It employed ethnographic methods in studying two schools in Helsinki, Finland with students in their first year of secondary school.

We started school at the beginning of a new school year with the students. We were attached in both schools to one particular class each, we received timetables and we tried to decipher the information provided. We immersed ourselves in the time–space paths of students, anxious about finding the right room at the right time (Gordon *et al.* 1999). Slowly we became part of the networks of our respective classes. We experienced the spatial and temporal aspects of everyday life at school, and like the students, we also worried about integration and marginalization. We shared some moments of boredom and exasperation with students—there were times when our notes record that we think the lesson is never going to end—and moments of pleasure and laughter.

Our main observation lasted for 1 school year in the mid-1990s,<sup>2</sup> with some visits during the next 2 years. We conducted observation during lessons, writing detailed fieldnotes. We also engaged in participant observation, for example, doing some of the tasks allocated to the school students, and during breaks we had informal discussions with students and with teachers. We attended special events such as school discos, parents' evenings and Christmas celebrations and gathered documents such as teaching materials, letters sent home, report cards and students' work. We collected metaphors, associations and conducted questionnaires. We observed networks among students, interaction between teachers and classes, as well as interaction between specific teachers and specific students. Together with our four collaborators we interviewed 96 students, 44 teachers and four members of support staff.

Through the multiple methods of ethnography, we developed a multilayered understanding of the everyday life of the school students in our study. We knew the framework of the school, such as the curriculum, timetables, school rules, the school buildings and the local area, we got to know the practices, and we experienced some of the emotions (Gordon *et al.* 2000a). Our approach in the field reflected our theoretical and methodological orientation, in which we drew from cultural studies, social constructionism and post-structuralist and materialist feminism (cf. Wexler 1992, Roman 1993, Kenway *et al.* 1998, Walkerdine 1998).

### Tracing transitions: longitudinal research interviews

Ethnographers frequently discuss the difficulties of leaving the field (Coffey 1999). Our solution was not to make a complete exit. We decided to conduct follow-up research with the students instigating thereby a longitudinal study. We got in touch with them when they were about 18, just on the verge of formal adulthood. Most of the students (63) were willing to participate in a transitions study, although a few (seven) refused or could not be traced.<sup>3</sup>

For our first transitions contact, we chose group interviews for a range of methodological and analytical reasons. We were interested in how the young people would talk about their secondary schooling in which we had to some extent participated. Whilst we did not engage in memory-work as such in the group interviews, the students interacted with each other and with the researchers in this process of remembering. We were also interested in difference, in how young people thought about dimensions of difference such as gender, social class, 'race'/ethnicity, nationality and sexual orientation. We wanted to explore some culturally shared understandings, as well as diverse and contradictory voices. Group interviews facilitated this, as they did discussions on social dimensions of age.<sup>4</sup>

The second transition interviews took place 2 years later. For these interviews the young people's transitions were the main focus, with less emphasis on cultural understandings, although we planned to be sensitive to such conceptions, but to deal with them in a more embedded manner. Our methodological practice meant that we wanted to give choice and agency to the researched. For the second interview we gave them the option of being interviewed in groups/pairs, or alone. We also wanted them to take control of the content of the interview to some extent. This time there were fewer group interviews than before and the interviews had a more life history, biographical orientation. Issues such as 'difference', 'citizenship' and 'nationality' were explored in the context of young people's narratives about events in their lives. The longitudinal nature of the study, with its repeated contact, also had implications for the conduct of the interviews, as they became increasingly reflexive over time.

Both sets of transition interviews, as well as the earlier ethnographic interviews with the same young people at school, were semi-structured, but during the second transition interviews the interviewees tended to be more active in guiding the direction and emphasis of the discussions in all the interviews, although the strength of this direction varied from interview to interview. This was an interactive process. The initial, open-ended questions gave the interviewees an opportunity to embark on life historical narratives. We asked in the beginning: 'What are the main things in your mind at the moment?' Asking such a question when talking to an unfamiliar person would not make sense—but we had noted that in the first transition interviews the young people had tended to think about the sorts of things they expected to discuss prior to our meeting, and we used this approach to encourage their agency in the research practice. For example, Lotta was interviewed with Julia and when Tuula asked what they were currently preoccupied with, Lotta laughed and asked 'in relation to what?'

- Tuula: Well I don't know really, it's just whatever comes to your mind first.
- Lotta: (thinks and sighs) Well, for example, WTO [World Trade Organization] action days (laughs)—I keep thinking about that.
- Tuula: Do you want to talk about that a bit?
- Lotta: Well (sighs) you know they're in Qatar at the moment, the WTO ministerial meeting that deals with broad issues (laughs) and influences people's living circumstances throughout the world . . . so action has been organized in different parts of the world . . .

A great deal of the interview with Lotta and Julia focused on their activism. It emerged as a fundamental frame and is related to their lifestyles and decisions about the future. Overall, our interviews combine systematic exploration by the researcher based on what she wants to know, with openness to surprises, mysteries and the unfathomable based on what the interviewees want to tell. This is within the context of a focus on transitions, and our (albeit minor) part as fellow travelers in those transitions

In relation to the longitudinal perspective the interviews became increasingly reflexive over time and it is evident that the interviewees spend time in anticipating them. This anticipation meant that they tended to make sure that they could talk about issues that were important to them, or that they assumed were important for us. We had to be skilful listeners in order to bring up the issues we were interested in, in the context of the narratives presented to us by our interviewees. Our post-interview sheets at times record the researcher's frustration at having been in too much of a rush before the interview, anticipating having to dash off somewhere after the interview, or being too tired or flustered to listen carefully enough. Barbara Sherman Heyl (2001) suggests that listening well and respectfully and promoting dialogue are aspects of ethnographic interviews that are based on ongoing relationships. Valerie Hey (2000) emphasizes the importance of rapport as practice in ethnographic interviews. The significance of sensitivity, respect and rapport increases in a longitudinal study. We had been known adults to our interviewees for several years. This increased our responsibility towards them, because we talked in the context of relationships that were closer than one-off interviews. Shared experiences and memories of the earlier ethnography were important, and we shall return to these later.

The interviews were increasingly meeting points. Rapport is signified through body language, adopting a posture of listening, not expressing shock or disapproval, but nevertheless demonstrating compassion, sensitivity and adult responsibility. In the latest interviews we showed our publications, and have sent copies of articles and interview transcripts to those who expressed interest. We also made available information about

help-lines if that was deemed to be necessary. At the same time we do not want to overstate rapport (cf. Lather 1997). We did not encourage the young women and men to tell us their deepest secrets or reveal their most sensitive hopes and fears. Whilst some of the interviewees kept clear lines between what they wanted to keep private and what they were willing to reveal, others were keener to discuss very personal matters.

Julie McLeod and Lyn Yates (1997), in their longitudinal research with young girls, adopted a relationship with interviewees that was relatively formal. Their ethical and epistemological reasons for this are appropriate. But in our case, because of the shared history during the ethnographic phase, we could not 'remain adult women from the university' (McLeod and Yates 1997: 27). Although we were researchers in the eyes of the young women and men, we were also personalized. For example, when we collected 'associations' in the context of the ethnographic interviews at school, the prompt word 'researcher' might elicit 'you' as a response.

The longitudinal nature of the study, and our methodological and ethical stance, led us to take a particular position when we strongly disagreed with our interviewees, for example, when they presented racist or sexist comments. Griffin (cited in Skeggs 2001) argues that in the context of research on inequalities such as racism, researchers collude with racist practices if they do not 'talk back'. As our interviewees had known us for several years, we considered ourselves as meaningful (even though at the same time marginal) adults to them. Whilst we did not challenge any racist or sexist views expressed, we did not consider it appropriate to let them pass. We engaged in a form of debate rather than argument, suggesting for example, patterns of inequalities demonstrated by research (such as gendered differentiation in schools, lower pay for women, a high unemployment rate among immigrants and refugees in Finland) when young women and men emphasized equality and lack of discrimination in Finland (cf. Roman 1993).

One of the principles of ethical research is reciprocity: the researched give us information, so we should return the favour and provide them with something that may be useful (Skeggs 2001). We did not give our interviewees a great deal of tangible rewards. Many of them, however, seemed to enjoy the interviews, because they found the discussions inspiring and used the occasion as an opportunity to reflect on their lives, as Otto commented: 'questions that I haven't got time to think about'.

### **Contexts: ethnography meets life history**

An essential methodological principle that we share with life historians is contextualization: we were interested not only in the narratives through which people interpret their experiences, but also in the cultural, social and material conditions and positions through which they live their lives and plan for their future. We analyse possibilities of, and limitations in, their agency, as well as their own sense of being agentic (Gordon and Lahelma 2002, cf. Evans 2002).

We have characterized our earlier ethnographic research as ‘contextualized’—we framed our research on everyday life at school through an analysis of educational politics and policies (Gordon *et al.* 2000a). Evoking a context means, for us, a way of framing processes, practices and meanings discussed in our interviews and in other data. New Right politics and policies, with emphasis on ‘individual’ ‘choice’, continue to provide an important context for locating the ways in which transitions are explored (cf. Ball *et al.* 2000). For example, young women wonder ‘what sort of woman should I be?’ or ‘what is my thing?’ (Gordon and Lahelma 2002). They feel they ought to be remaking themselves, as neo-liberalist ideology suggests, but may find it a difficult and confusing process (cf. Walkerdine *et al.* 2001).

Another important context is ethnography itself. We can look at photographs and see a young girl with an apparently confident smile, know that she had a particular friendship group, and be aware of her success at school. We will have seen her parent/s in the parents’ evening. Teachers have made comments about her. We can compare and contrast this girl to the young woman at the age of 18, with heavily made-up eyes that reflect the experiences she has had with substance abuse and difficult relationships with men.

A further contextualization is the physical spaces where we have observed the school students—and shared those spaces with them. We have experienced temporal and spatial social relations they had to engage with by locating ourselves in these same time–space paths. We have seen them conforming, adapting, sidestepping or resisting social relations embedded in time and space (Gordon *et al.* 1999). We have talked to them about how they have felt when they have engaged in particular practices.

The social relations in which the young women and men are located are significant. We have longitudinal information about how they are placed—and place themselves—in gender, ‘race’, class, sexual and national orders. We know how they talked about such orders at secondary school, during post-16 education and whilst entering further and higher education or the labour market. These social relations cohere in complex configurations and challenge the researcher to try to capture that complexity.

### **Temporalities: past, present and future**

Joint memories with the young people provided us with material to refer to in subsequent interviews. The interviewers’ comments often referred to earlier interviews and participant observation, pointing out to the interviewee her or his consistency or change of perception. A deeper reflection might develop in the discussion as in the following extract that continued with a long narrative:

Elina: . . . shall we move to the secondary school now. What comes to your mind?

Auli: Not very nice memories. There was all sorts of, well I don’t know, it was somehow, it distresses me to think about it.

Elina: I remember that during the seventh grade you felt that you were getting on really well.

Auli: Yes I got on really well 'til halfway through the eighth grade, but the downhill started . . .

The interviewees often commented on earlier joint experiences too. Tarja Palmu (2003) has analysed ways in which, in the context of ethnographic interviews, constant small references are made to shared experiences between the interviewer and the interviewee, thus constructing a joint frame of reference.

In the interviews we asked the young people to explicate what was important in their present lives, but also to reflect on their past lives as remembered and their futures as imagined. Paraphrasing Gabriela Rosenthal (1997), we can reconstruct the lived-through life history of these young people, as well as reconstruct their own construction of their life, that is, how their past appears to them today—beyond their conscious interest in presentation—and how it makes sense of their present and future. Through these varying positions of past, present and future, we can acquire a multilayered picture of young people's transitions to adulthood as well as of their changing dreams and fears.

Unlike in ordinary life history research, we also have our own memories of these young people at the age of 13. Ours differ from their memories not only because of the different position in the classroom (researchers versus students), but because our memories have been constantly activated when reading and rereading thousands of pages of lesson notes, field diaries and interviews, reflecting, analysing, and writing. Our interviewees were fossilized as seventh graders in our thoughts (Tolonen 2001) when we met them again as young adults. For example, the extract from Auli's interview above suggests Elina's faint surprise when hearing that Auli did not enjoy secondary school, when compared with Elina's fieldnotes and memories of the ethnographic interview (Lahelma 2002).

The question about secondary school years often evoked enjoyable memories and laughter when young people recollected friends, jokes, and situations when the official teaching and learning process was challenged (Lahelma 2002). At the age of 20, some of the young people were willing and capable of analysing their own earlier life and discussing, for example, their position in the secondary classroom. In these reflections they often wanted to express how they have changed and talked about their past and present selves (cf. Komulainen 2000). Throughout the interview Santtu emphasized how he has changed, and remembered himself in secondary school as follows:

Santtu: I remember I wanted to be sort of really hard (laughs) a really hard guy sort of . . . I mean I reckon everybody wants to be—as a teenager, when you're young—sort of hard . . . Maybe that's just something like wanting to be accepted . . . And I reckon I had an incredible longing for attention too.



During the interviews, several aspects of the present situation of the young people were discussed: for example, work, studying, relationships, their economic situation, as well as their current perceptions of various societal and moral questions. We talked about processes and practices, as well as meanings attached to them. But the present was constantly reflected in relation to the past, as well as in plans or dreams concerning the future.

### **Representations: ethics and politics of writing**

Ethnographers have increasingly considered issues of representation and emphasized the importance of reflexivity of the researcher whilst doing fieldwork and when writing about other people's lives. Representation is tied in with epistemological and ethical issues (Murphy and Dingwall 2001). Feminist ethnography is informed by feminist ethics, and feminist researchers often use reciprocity, honesty, accountability, responsibility and/or equality in order to treat participants of ethnography with respect (Skeggs 2001). Judith Stacey (1988) asked '*Can there be feminist ethnography?*' She wondered, for example, whether the appearance of greater respect for, and equality with, research subjects in the ethnographic approach masks a deeper, more dangerous form of exploitation. She also noted that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave the relationship, and that the research product—however collaborative the process has been—is ultimately that of the researcher. There can and should be feminist research that is rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its vision and its capacity to represent self and other (Stacey 1988). Stacey's article has been regarded as rather pessimistic (Skeggs 2001), but the questions are still relevant.

We have tackled issues of representation throughout our studies, and have sought a range of diverse solutions. For example, we used the multilayered approach to solve the problems of representation and analysis. In our first transition interviews we were interested in ways in which constructions of difference and sameness were connected to nationality, and wanted to explore whether 'mapped pedagogies' that we had observed at school were evident in young people's cultural understandings. For example, we took them metaphorically on 'a trip round the world' and asked them to tell us what first came into their minds when they heard words such as 'Sweden', 'Russia', 'Africa' and 'Europe'. When we analysed their responses (Gordon and Lahelma 2001), we realized that the paper could be read as expressing our disapproval of the ethnocentricity of our interviewees. We used multilayered analysis and included data on school textbooks and classroom observations and thus demonstrated that the young people's opinions reflected culturally shared understandings, some of which were encountered at school. In our conclusions we argued that our analysis posed a challenge for pedagogic practices.

Heyl (2001) suggests that life history interviewing fits ethnography, in that both are conducted over time, within relationships characterized by rapport, and with a focus on the meanings the interviewees place on their

experiences and circumstances. Ann Filer and Andrew Pollard (1998), who conducted longitudinal ethnographic research in schools in the 1980s, suggest that the power of such an approach is that it adds the dimension of time to the holistic and multi-perspective research design of classic ethnography. We argue in addition that ethnographic background adds new perspectives to longitudinal life history research when the past, present and future in people's lives are considered.

## Notes

1. The alphabetical order of the authors reflects joint contribution.
2. We worked in Helsinki together with Pirkko Hynninen, Tuija Metso, Tarja Palmu and Tarja Tolonen (Gordon *et al.* 2000b). Janet Holland conducted a similar study in London (e.g. Gordon *et al.* 2000a). This earlier study, as well as our current projects, is financed by the Academy of Finland.
3. In the ethnography we had conducted additional interviews with students who had some joint lessons with our 'own' classes.
4. Twenty-seven young people were interviewed in groups of three, 26 in pairs and 10 on their own.

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