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using a sociological perspective to
inform social work practice

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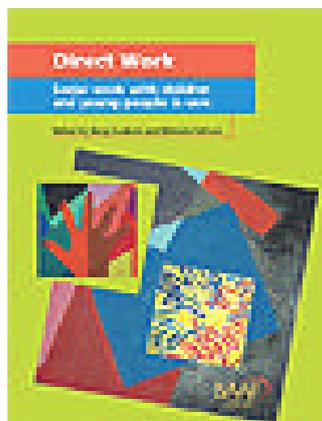
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Introduction

This chapter has three main aims. Firstly, it introduces how contemporary sociological approaches to the study of childhood can enable us to make sense of the social worlds of children and young people. Secondly, the chapter reports on how we are drawing on such approaches to inform the establishment of an on-going research project with looked after children, (Extra)ordinary Lives, and some findings from the research are presented. Thirdly, the chapter explores the relevance of sociological approaches to the study of childhood for direct practice, drawing out implications of both the research methods and some of the research findings for those who work with children and young people.

Exploring children's worlds using sociological perspectives

In the late 1990s the Economic and Social Research Council funded a large programme of research called *Children 5 - 16 : Growing into the 21st Century*. This was responding to a shift in the way that academics, policy makers, legislators and practitioners were coming to understand children and young people and their place in society. It was stated that:

The Programme will consolidate and build on this work through a focus on children as social actors. This will be achieved by examining children as active agents, influencing as well as being influenced by the worlds they live in, and/or through research which treats children as the primary unit of analysis (rather than subsuming them under, for example, the household)... The Programme will attempt to illuminate the middle period of childhood and the nature and quality of children's family and social lives, children's sense of belonging and their contribution to society, together with their understandings, expectations and aspirations for the future.¹

¹ <http://www.hull.ac.uk/children5to16programme/intro.htm>

This summary is a useful starting point for this chapter. It signals a marked shift in the social sciences from viewing children as passive objects of research and policy making to research participants whose perspectives are not only important in their own right but whose accounts are taken as competent portrayals of their experiences (Qvortrup et al. 1994). It has long been recognised that 'childhood' is fundamentally a social construction, in that there is no universal norm of what the experiences of childhood are or should be and when childhood begins and ends (James and Prout, 1998). Notions of what it is to be 'a child' vary within and between cultures, over time and across generations (James and James 2004). Nevertheless, dominant discourses endure in research, in policy and in popular culture about children and childhood (Valentine, 1996; James *et al.*, 1998). These include early concepts of children as inherently evil, requiring discipline and correction, or as innocent, requiring nurturance and protection. Both can be understood in terms of risk anxiety, as fear of children and fear for children (Scott, Jackson and Backett-Milburn, 1998). Discourses about looked after children in the media and in social work literature, for example, can tend to polarise children as either 'innocent victims' at risk from abusive parents *or* 'out-of-control' and in need of restraint (Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers 1992). Whether 'at risk' or 'creating risk' most children and young people who are looked after are represented in terms of their futures – these being bleak futures with poor outcomes. More complex and more up-beat understandings of looked after children are somewhat thinner on the ground (Chase *et al.*, 2006; Winter, 2006).

The emphasis on futures and outcomes also has a long history. Traditional theories of childhood, both early developmental psychology and early socialisation theories, viewed childhood primarily as a preparation for adulthood and considered children only in terms of their future becomings, rather than 'somebody' in their own right (Walkerdine 2004). Social policies with children as the object of their enquiry, have focused on, and been justified as, producing adult citizens. Prioritising futures and 'outcomes', however, neglects children's everyday, 'now', experiences and the complex relationship between their past, present and future. Developments within contemporary social science research, however, are beginning to emphasise not only children as 'beings' rather than

solely 'becomings' but how children are constituted as both being and becoming (Lee 2001; Prout 2005).

Early socialisation theories which viewed children as passive recipients of social processes and relationships have been widely critiqued (Jenks 1992). Locating children as 'social actors', active in the construction and determination of their social lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live, has led to more complex explorations of the ways in which children exercise agency (James and James, 2004). This also involves recognising a range of social and cultural norms that heavily regulate children's ability to make choices in numerous contexts from the family to the wider community which continue to construct children as relatively passive and powerless (Christensen and O'Brien 2003).

The social and cultural contexts in which children are located are thus key influences in making sense of the social world of the child. Significant to this are developments within sociology regarding notions of space and place, that link in with geographical literature. Recent years have witnessed a surge of interest and research into the geographies of children and childhood (Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Here, the ways in which children give meaning to their everyday environments, be they rural, suburban, inner-city, near or far from networks of relatives, and how children engage in and with these local environments form a significant part of how children's lives are negotiated. Structural relations between children and adults are important, however children do not form a homogenous group. Socio-cultural factors like class, gender, ethnicity, nationality all have social and material effects on their everyday experiences (Renold 2005; Scourfield et al. 2006; Connolly 1998). Societal expectations of children from particular socio-economic and cultural backgrounds will strongly affect how people respond to children and how these children develop their own sense of self.

Sociological approaches exploring social identities, relationships and cultures have developed significantly in the field of childhood studies. In particular, poststructuralist perspectives have challenged the notion that individual identity

categories (e.g. girl, boy, sister, brother) or collective identity categories (e.g. family) can be known in any straightforward or fixed way (Hadfield et al. 2006). For example, rather than trying to define the concept of 'family', many sociologists would be interested in finding out what a family does, in the family practices that make people feel that they belong to each other (Morgan, 1991). Who we are, then, is not something fixed or singular or easily known. Rather, identity is always evolving, always in-process. It is something that is experienced, expressed, managed and continuously performed differently according to context and over time (Goffman 1959; Butler 1993). While the concept of identity is big business in social theory, it is a concept that has filtered down to the level of practice. For example, materials such as the Looked After Children guidance (Department of Health, 1995) and the Assessment Framework (Department of Health, 2000) tend to encourage a semi-public labelling of children specifically using the concept of 'identity' in arenas such as statutory reviews and court reports. Although these materials have important and worthy intentions of encouraging holistic attention to the child's life, practices such as reproducing phrases from textbooks and pasting phrases from form to form, encourage fixed and deterministic notions of children's lives and expected futures (Holland, 2004).

Lastly, contemporary sociological research on children's lives has been drawn to qualitative methodologies that pay attention to and draw out children's own perspectives, rather than learning about their lives through the eyes of others (see Greig *et al.* 2007, Christensen and James 2000) and in more direct ways than is possible through experimental or survey style research. This shift, which views children as active participants rather than passive objects in the research process, is again related to the desire to recognise children as active meaning makers in their own right and thus experts on their own lives. This is especially important given that children's views have, historically, been (and in some research practices continue to be) marginalised (Woodhead and Faulkner 2000). Contemporary research studies that prioritise children's voices and experiences, (i.e. how children understand and express themselves) are often drawn to ethnographic and, in the case of our own longitudinal research, narrative approaches (James and Prout 1998). By using a narrative approach to

explore and understand children's accounts, we pay less attention to verifying the 'facts' or 'truth' of a story, and instead focus on the meaning that the story has for the child and what it might tell us about how they understand themselves and their relationships with others. Narrative approaches, which are used in research, in social work and in therapeutic practice, recognise 'the ways in which we make and use knowledge to create and preserve our social worlds and places within them' (Fook, 2002: 132).

The next section of this chapter explains how some of these developments, particularly the focus on the 'everyday', on 'voice' and on method have underpinned and informed our own sociologically driven research study at Cardiff University: (Extra)ordinary Lives: Children's Everyday Relationships in Public Care.

The (Extra)ordinary lives project

Children who are looked after are often called upon to reflect upon their lives. For example, they are routinely asked to express their opinions about themselves in reviews, and occasionally about the looked after system more generally in consultations about policies and practices. However, these questions are often only directed at aspects of their lives that relate to professional, and thus adult-centred, areas and interests and are usually framed within discourses of protection (e.g. health, self-care skills etc.) or rights (e.g. education). Much of what we 'know' about the social world of children who are looked after is restricted to aspects of their life or experiences as it relates to the looked after system. While aware that both their experience of the looked-after system and the care they receive more widely are important, we have designed a research project that foregrounds children's everyday lives allowing children and young people the freedom to choose what aspects of their lives to explore and how to represent these. We were also aware that young people who are looked after often complain that consultations are one-off occasions and that they have no knowledge of what happens to their opinions and sometimes view practitioners as only visiting and asking about their lives when a statutory review is due. We therefore wished to conduct a piece of research that built

relationships over a longer period of time, and where the ethos was one of reciprocity.

Following consultations with Tros Gynnal, a children's charity specialising in advocacy, and some young care leavers, we set up a fortnightly project for looked after children and care leavers, which we called 'Me, myself and I'². Nine young people aged 10-20 living in foster, kinship care or living independently as care leavers in one local authority took part in the study over a school year (2006-7). The young people (seven girls and two boys) were invited to explore any aspect of their everyday lives that they chose, using any of the materials we made available. These included video and still digital cameras, scrapbooks, art and writing materials and music mixing on lap-tops. Most young people also used the space (in a comfortable building owned by the children's charity) as a place to relax after school or work, to eat, socialise and play. Some wished to do life-history interviews, chose to keep diaries or took us on guided walks of their current or former neighbourhoods. Indeed, some of our most productive conversations took place in the car or when walking. At the same time as running this project, we as researchers observed the processes and tape-recorded many of our interactions with the young people. The young people were constantly reminded that this was a research study and that they had control over what was recorded and could decide what they wished to share with us from the materials they had produced. One girl only participated briefly in the project. The other eight participants took part for the full school year and have expressed a wish to maintain on-going contact with the research team, which will be fulfilled by occasional 'catch-up' meetings and reunions.

The reciprocal nature of the research included an aim to provide young people with opportunities for fun and for learning new skills. We employed the oldest participant ('Jolene') as a youth support worker with the younger participants. The participative ethos was promoted by regularly discussing the aims and methods of the research with the young people, getting their ideas on how to

² The overall research study is called Extra(ordinary) Lives: Children's everyday relationship cultures in public care. It is one of the demonstrator projects from the Qualiti node (Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Innovation, Integration and Impact) of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. (see: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/qualiti/>)

understand their lives better, and feeding back to them what we felt we had found out and understood about their lives. We will be returning to each participant in the near and far future (if they continue to wish to keep in touch) to involve them further in analysis and dissemination of results, and to avoid the common phenomenon of adults making connections then losing touch with young people who are looked after.

Our research questions examine the notion of children's participation, a common claim in both current practice and research studies. We have tried to critically examine our own and others' claims to be enabling children to be full participants in a process. To this end we are mindful not to evade the issue of adults' retention of power of resources, process and agenda. In our research we informed the young people that we were interested in their relationships (e.g. with friends, families, carers, local communities and professionals), in places of importance to them and their negotiation of their localities, in their identities, and any other aspects of how they live their everyday lives or how they understand who they are. More formally, some of our research questions include:

- In what ways do 'looked after' children experience belonging to, or dislocation from, their local communities, 'family', friends and other social networks over time and across social contexts?
- What does it mean to identify and be identified as 'looked after' across different 'public' and 'private' spaces?
- What are the conditions within which 'looked after' children create and maintain 'safe' spaces to manage their relations/hips and 'identity-work' in the ways that they want?
- What structures, cultures, settings and spaces do children identify that support more positive identities of children in public care?

Many of the sociological developments within the field of childhood studies mentioned earlier in the chapter inform this research, such as: taking an interest in children's lives as they are lived in the 'here and now', not just in relation to the future adults they will become; an awareness that much of what we understand about children's lives is socially constructed by the dominant

discourses that are embedded in our society; and a desire to critically listen to children's own stories and representations of their lives.

The next section gives some examples from the data we generated with the young people in the research study and has two aims. Firstly, this section illustrates the ways in which our approach (a sociology of everyday lives) facilitates the generation of rich and complex personal accounts from the perspective of children living and negotiating those everyday lives. Secondly, we wish to give space for young people's voices to be reported directly in this chapter. The data included here relate to one theme, schooling. This theme was chosen for this chapter to illustrate the research approach adopted and because it was a strong theme to emerge from these young people's accounts of their everyday lives. Schooling was not a theme we researched directly with the young people, but we would suggest that our approach enabled the young people to talk in more depth about their experiences of schooling, as they did about many other social spaces they inhabit. We believe this approach allowed the young people to contribute more about their lives than a more structured style of interviewing might have produced. In keeping with a narrative approach, the data have not been neatly compartmentalised into neatened, short quotations. Instead we report longer extracts from these young people's narratives in an attempt to foreground their voices rather than our 'findings'³.

(Extra)ordinary Lives data examples: young people's interactions in and with the school environment

Navaeh

In the course of a long, taped discussion with one of the researchers, Nevaeh⁴ (aged 17), tells the story of all the places she has lived since leaving her family home at fourteen and eventually coming into care after a period of homelessness. Throughout this conversation she regularly referred to school

³ A series of dots (...) denotes that a word or phrase has been cut (usually just a single word or phrase from the researcher). A slash (/) denotes interruption or overlapping speech.

⁴ All young people chose their own pseudonyms. Nevaeh is 'heaven' spelt backwards.

and education. During the discussion she mentions the changes of school associated with her regular changes of address, the long periods of missed schooling when her life was more unstable, how important education is to her and how, when she finally was placed successfully with an experienced carer, she was able to feel that she was in a 'proper family' linking this to her carer's positive attitude to schooling. The following is a series of extracts about schooling from the hour-long discussion:

(Whilst living at home): Cause I used to get bullied at home and at school. But it was like I used to go to school just to get away from there.

(When homeless): I moved in with (friend), and I heard nothing, I had to wash my clothes everyday just so I could wear them, cause that was all I had, I had nothing else, you know. I wasn't in school for ages and ages and ages. And education has always been a big part. Sorry, but I've always wanted to have a good education, because once you've got a good education I think anyway, you're sorted.

(Whilst with recent foster carers): It's great, it's like a proper family life...That's how it is. You know, when I used to come home from school, 'How was your day'. She did that and asked, How was my day? She's like, (inaudible) she was there for me for my School Prom and then when I got my GCSE results...And since I was with her, ah I did brilliantly at school, really really well in school, because I had no confidence to go to school before. I mean it was like, I was being bullied in my first school, and then on my second school, I was friends with everybody. I liked, it went from being, I was miserable, overweight, I was getting bullied, I was just so much always crying until I moved onto (carer) a couple of months later I was a totally different person, just totally different. It was wicked.

Nevaeh is able, in retrospect, to tell a narrative of her education with an ending, as she has now left school, is living independently and is in paid employment.

She uses the story of her schooling to illustrate how, when she was homeless and moving between various family members and friends she was not living the sort of life she felt was a proper life for a child, in terms of prioritising education and living with people who cared about education, and therefore showing their care for Nevaeh. Through the story of her schooling, we are able to obtain a glimpse of Nevaeh's interpretation of her life story, what that means to her current identity and expectations regarding childhood and family life.

Keely

Keely (aged 13), on the other hand is still experiencing her schooling. She is currently fostered, but she has had many different care experiences, including residential care. Every time we meet Keely, she relates another episode of her interactions with teachers and with peers in school. Through these, it is possible to gain a sense of how Keely negotiates her everyday identities as 'looked after', academically able and with a keen sense of injustice at the administration of the school regime. The following extracts are taken from a tape recording of a car journey when a researcher collected Keely from school. Brief interjections from the researcher have been omitted.

What he (senior school teacher) did, he goes, he goes 'I know your family life and I know your brothers have just gone in to care and all that'. I went 'three people in the class knew that, I didn't want everyone knowing, they all gonna come up to me now right and do my head in'. And then he went 'Keely calm down', I went 'screw you, you just like, blatantly just told everyone'. And he went, 'Keely there's no reason to get upset about it', I went 'I'm not upset, I'm just mad at you for doing it like'. (further conversation took place on other topics)....And I do not like holidays at all....I hate 'em...I love my school, I just don't like the teachers. I can do all the work...The work's too easy though. It's just like – oh, do something different....(in the holidays I) miss my friends, you know, don't - cause like I'm in care I'm not allowed to give out my phone number so I can't use that –

Keely expresses here her fury at her teacher referring to her care status in front of her peers. She has only been in this school for a year and has established herself as 'the hardest girl in the school' (as she herself puts it) through physical fighting. She appears, and feels, vulnerable through reference to her family problems. However, as well as the negative brushes with authority, it also appears that school holds many positives for her, in terms of academic achievement and friendships. Yet, here again, her care 'status' intervenes, in that (in her case) she is not allowed to give out her foster carers' number to her friends.

On another occasion, Keely and Nevaeh happened to be having a lift in the car together. Keely mentioned that she has been having problems with some of her friends in school because she has been moved up two sets.

Nevaeh: I had friends like that who wouldn't speak to me because I was higher than them in school....So I used to lie a lot and tell them that I was thick and/

Keely: I did that,

Nevaeh: Yeah.

Keely: And then I moved up and then....When she kicks off, she's goes Keely you're not that intelligent, well I'm more intelligent than you, now go away....If my homework was done in school they would all think that I was guinea (goody goody).....I would be like 'shut up'.

Research in the sociology of education points to struggles for socially and economically marginalised girls and young women to seek out and maintain educationally successful identities in school (Lucey et al. 2003). It is perhaps the case that these young women who are in care have even more of a challenge in terms of negotiating social identity with their peers and teachers. Both had moved schools on a number of occasions and had to form new friendships in mid-adolescence in fairly challenging school environments. Societal expectations are for these young women, from challenging social backgrounds and now in care, to underachieve academically (Berridge 2006). For each of them, the formal and informal worlds of school frequently collide;

academic achievement forms part of their identity, but so does maintaining a 'hard' image (Renold, forthcoming).

Jolene

Jolene (aged 20) offered to do a life history interview as part of the project. Afterwards she read the transcript, reflected on it and further discussed her understanding of her life and the significance of her history to her current identity. Like Nevaeh, the narrative of her schooling has a conclusion as she has left school and is now working, whilst waiting to go to university. Also like Nevaeh, her narrative describes her foster carers' attitudes as important in enabling her to succeed academically. Earlier in the interview she (rather affectionately) recalls how her birth family would let her miss school on her birthday, something that would never have been allowed in her foster home. She goes on to describe her educational progress after coming into care in late primary school. Brief interjections from the interviewer have been omitted.

So I've been able to change those things (the culture of her birth family) with me. Do you know what I mean? So if I realise the things, I do the same things as them and I don't like it then I can change it because I've seen what it does....I think I've definitely broken that (she is describing a family culture of low achievement). I mean I'm twenty; I've got no kids so that is a starter. Em, I, I've been to college and I'm planning to go to University and no one in my family's ever been to sixth form college....Em, I came out of school with good results em, when it wasn't easy. I didn't just work and then just get these grades. I had to work for them because I'm not em, I'm not like very academic ... so, you know em (pause) one thing is like I've learned is that if you want something you've got to work for it, in different aspects. If you want something like and you need money, then you need to work for it and save that money and you can't just spend money on these random crap that people do which honestly sometimes I do. Now I did for years. It took me a while to break that, that one, em, but also if you want something like I want to go to University you have to work for it. I knew

when I was in school that I would need my maths GCSE's and I was only fifteen when I did my exams and I knew I would need it and I worked my hardest on it and I came out with a D and I need a C, so I went to college and I did maths again and I still got a D, so I did it again and I just kept going until I got my C...I got it my third time, but out of all my exams, all my exams were C to B except my maths and the reason that I wasn't good at that was because I missed so much schooling as a kid, but I knew that that, that is what I would need so I kept working at it, and working at it and working until I got there. Whereas my family, like my cousin he went to sixth form, he was doing sport, he was offered a scholarship (abroad) to do sport. Did he take it? No. I mean are you kidding me? [laughter] I would be well gone by now.

Kate

Kate (aged 15) who attends a special unit for students with learning difficulties within a comprehensive school, and lives in kinship care, talked on numerous occasions about her interactions with peers and teachers at school. By getting to know her over a year, we were able to piece together an understanding of her sense of identity and relationship cultures, out of what were at times rather confusing stories. Here are extracts from a taped conversation on the 14th project session. The researcher and Kate are looking at a slideshow of photographs she has taken of her family, bedroom and local community. As they look at the slideshow, Kate chats about the photos, but also about her relationships with her family and a great deal about school (interestingly since none of her photos related to school). A little of this narrative is reproduced below. It can take several readings to make sense of. The researcher's words are in regular text.

I can't wait until I leave school. And school goes, 'What you doing now, Kate? Stop doing that.' Oh my god, you should have seen them though. Miss Brown does my head in.

Does she? What does she do?

Like in maths, I goes, 'Miss I'm stuck.' She goes, 'Wait a minute then Kate.' So what do I do? Rush on ahead. I goes, 'I'm okay now miss.' 'No you're not.' 'Listen.' 'No, I want to do this now.' She goes, 'No listen.' So I kept on doing it and then of course I throw my book, she didn't like it. I threw it straight across the classroom and she won't like it. The pages will be pulling out and I ripped the pages out of my book. Oh dear.

I'm going wrong, rip em, I don't care ... I don't care about my book ... my boyfriend said you can (inaudible)

What do you think you'll do when you leave school?

Go to college.

Yeah? What would you like to study there?

Don't know. You could go to pubs, you could go anywhere then

Yes.

I'd be happy then away from that school. I won't – and I won't be visiting it.

Won't you? Do some people come back?

They'll come back and goes, 'I wish, I wish I was up in your year Kate.' I goes, 'Yeah I wish I left school.' ... God you should see, you should see half of them. 'I want to come back into school.' 'No you don't. School's rubbish. I hate school.'

But the only thing I can't read after the words. So I'm up in special needs; I've got difficulties reading and everything. I try and goes, 'Miss I can't read this. Can't read that.' And what do I go off and do? Read it. 'Now spell it out, Kate.' Oh my god, driving me mad. Teacher – half of them have left school anyway, hates them ... I hates the teachers, was it. I refused to do PE....

I ran out of a classroom before. My teachers dragged me ... 'Get out Kate.' What was it? Every time I had a pen in my hand my teachers turn round and goes, 'Get out now'. Me and my friend were marking each other with felt tips. He's got a mark straight across there with blue. I marked him up on the back of his neck and my teacher went mad with me. He never goes mad with him, does he?

So I got – Ruth (cousin) hasn't got no problems, I have?.

Right.

Not, not with people I don't mean.

No, I know.

With reading and that...

I gave the teacher a look then I'm gone. If she'd asked me I would have been gone and I would have been gone home. I can walk out of school no problem.

Yeah.

And then all they've got to do is just phone my Nan. Yeah. I'm not scared to do that.

And then what happens?

Then I'm grounded.

In these extracts Kate lets us know that she does not like school. It appears that the rules do not make sense to her and the teachers behave irrationally and unfairly without listening to her. She also tells us something of her relationships with her classmates, introduces her cousin Ruth and her Nan (both of whom she lives with) into the narrative. Towards the end of the extract Nan is brought in as an alternative authority figure by the teachers, but Kate lets us know that she is not scared of her Nan as she knows the consequences of her Nan's involvement. To Kate, the predictability of her Nan's response to bad behaviour can be seen to contrast with the perceived unpredictability of the teachers in the school. Her cousin's academic ability (this is also mentioned later in the conversation) is contrasted to her own difficulties with reading and writing. But she is careful to assert her identity as someone who can get on with people, and indeed as someone who can stand up to the irrational (to her) rules and methods of the school and the teachers.

By understanding Kate, Keely, Jolene and Nevaeh's talk about school as a series of narratives about themselves and their relationships within the social space of the school, with their carers and with their futures, we escape being boxed in by concerns as to whether their stories about school are accurate or truthful. Our constructions of our identities and life stories are not fixed, but will

change over time and according to our audience. Jolene and Nevaeh might have told dramatic stories of everyday school life, like Keely and Ruth, if they were still in the throes of school attendance. Indeed both remarked at times on how much some of the young participants reminded them of their younger selves. Instead, both of the young adult participants were able to tell more completed and redemptive narratives of schooling that eventually went well and led to better things. Whilst Nevaeh's measurable *outcomes* do not look totally successful on paper, (teenage motherhood, currently unemployed), by looking at how she understands the trajectory of her life we can see a more nuanced picture that includes a sense of having triumphed over adversity. In the next section we discuss how in addition to reaching a broader understanding of these young people through their narratives, we can use these narratives to enable the young people to plan for positive change in their lives.

This section has only produced a snapshot of a few of the findings from the study. This small group of participants gave us privileged insights into their narratives of their everyday lives, producing hundreds of photographs, several filmed sequences, and hours of conversation. The final section makes links between this small-scale research study, and everyday practice with looked after young people.

Relevance to practice

There are some excellent larger scale studies that enable us to know something about the general patterns of looked after children's lives (see, for example, Sinclair *et al.* 2007). What small sample, participative, in-depth research studies, such as (Extra)ordinary Lives, do is to explore the individuality of children's lives behind the statistics and generalisations allowing us to take forward the sociological approaches to childhood outlined at the start of this chapter. In this sense, this research is closely aligned to practice, and we believe that there are some implications for practice from the study. Four areas are noted in this conclusion:

- Firstly, that by paying attention to young people's narratives about their lives we can understand their identities in all their messy complexity and avoid narrow or stereotypical constructions of young people in care.
- Secondly, that by enabling young people to choose *how* they wish to communicate with us we recognise them as social actors and begin to move our practice away from adult-centric procedures.
- Thirdly, it is argued that sustained relationships are needed in order to communicate successfully with children and young people in care.
- Lastly, it is suggested that as practitioners we can work with young peoples' narratives to enable them to plan and achieve positive change in their lives.

The young people in our study, like young people everywhere, are impossible to stereotype. In one sentence they can tell a narrative of hatred for school, and a fierce desire to achieve academically. Their feelings towards their birth families are often a complex mixture of love, loyalty, disdain, anger and indifference. They may present as strong, often tough, in their brushes with authority figures, but at the same time feel confused and upset by rules that appear unfair and arbitrary. By paying attention to the narratives told by young people we listen to what they choose to tell us, and how they frame themselves and others within the story. This gives some insight into how they see themselves, or at least the 'face' they wish to present to the person they are talking to. It gives some indication of their priorities and how they respond to, replicate or perhaps challenge dominant discourses about, for example, childhoods, gendered identities, performing family, being in care, etc. By researching with these young people over a period of time, we have been able to see narratives about their lives unfold, shift and be revised. This approach in communicating with young people, shifts the emphasis away from 'truths' about their experiences, or 'what they really think' about themselves. It recognises that we do not possess a single static identity or history. It prioritises instead self-perception and understandings of past, present and future as constantly being performed and revised. By applying this approach to practice we can avoid deterministic or narrow descriptions of young people's identities in assessments and reviews,

and perhaps avoid alienating those young people who do not recognise themselves in such reviews, and even stop them becoming self-fulfilling.

Many practitioners working with looked after young people are skilled communicators who are able to facilitate in-depth conversations with young people about their everyday lives, needs and aspirations. However, in the context of high case loads and a rapid turnover of staff, interactions between young people and practitioners such as social workers are at risk of becoming formulaic. Pressurised professionals can become overly focused on completing the correct paperwork, such as statutory review or assessment and action forms. Young people can feel that questions are being asked about their lives because of a bureaucratic routine, rather than because the questioner is genuinely curious about how they are. A key aspect of the (Extra)ordinary Lives project was that young people were enabled to choose their own methods to communicate with the researchers about their lives. Whilst not all practitioners have expensive equipment such as digital camcorders to hand, any adult can start a relationship by asking a young person how, where and what they prefer to communicate, and wherever possible, giving the young person some editorial control over how and where personal information is reported. Such an approach embraces the conceptualisation of children as active members of society. It also enables a focus on the young person's everyday life in the present rather than just focusing on outcomes – the adult they will become.

With young people who are looked after, we need to acknowledge that their identities and feelings about their life situation, relationship with their birth families, aspirations and understanding of their history will be constantly shifting over time and in different social settings. Therefore relationships with young people need to be sustained on an on-going basis. Brief interventions for assessments, or sporadic visits by social workers, are likely to produce a narrow understanding of young people's lives. McLeod (2007) gives a reflective account of some of the difficulties she encountered when conducting one-off research interviews with looked after young people. These included a reluctance to talk at all, giving very brief responses, a tendency to change the subject and giving responses that appeared to be untrue. She found that these

same young people's social workers had similar communication patterns with the young people. One of her conclusions is that relationships need to be ongoing and positive before young people will be prepared to talk to an adult about issues that concern them:

Clearly achieving a constructive relationship with some teenagers is the work of many months, or even years, and will not easily be achieved in a regime where brief interventions are the norm (McLeod, 2007:285).

At the beginning of our research fieldwork most of the young people answered our questions briefly and politely. After a period of time they talked in much more depth about their everyday experiences. They were also much less polite! In order to make some sense of young people's social worlds, we must build relationships that are sustained and move beyond the constraints of one-off research interviews or sporadic professional interventions.

Whilst research such as that reported in this chapter has a principal aim of reflecting the narratives of young people, and analysing these in their social and cultural context, practitioners need to do more than analyse, they must also provide support and therapeutic and practical help. It has been argued that, by paying attention to people's narratives about their lives, and by viewing these narratives as unfixed and multi-faceted we can enable people to interrogate, evaluate, disrupt or even overturn their narratives in order to promote positive and creative change (Parton, 2002). By enabling young people to talk about their lives we can allow them to 'control, reframe and move on' (Parton, 2002: 243). This approach has been developed in the field in the form of solution-focused interventions, narrative therapy and the strengths perspective. These take a collaborative style of working, rather than an 'expert-centric style' (Healy, 2005). The practitioner works alongside the young person to acknowledge their narratives of their lives. Sometimes, by simply listening to and validating their narrative, they may help an individual's (or group or community's) sense of self in the face of negative labelling by other individuals, systems or institutions. At other times, narratives are negative or destructive and the practitioner should attempt to enable a young person to deconstruct their own narratives and re-

construct a narrative that opens up a possibility of change (Fook, 2002). Parton and O'Byrne (2000) and Fook (2002: 132-141) give many practical examples of how people may be enabled to 'restory' their lives, which may involve more than just talk and understanding but also provide a framework for practical action to tackle negative behaviours, material deprivation and social injustices.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on how recent sociological understandings of children and childhood have relevance to how we understand and communicate with young people who are looked after. It has suggested that 'childhood' is socially constructed, that identities are performative and contextual, and that children can be regarded as social actors whose perspectives are important. We should be as interested in children's lives in their own right as in the adults they will become and pay attention to the narratives that young people tell in order to gain a more holistic understanding of their perspectives. These understandings of children and young people enable us to frame our communication with young people in terms of active participation by the young person, a willingness by the adult to listen over a sustained timespan and a broad conceptualisation of what the young person is communicating to us. Where necessary, we can also work with the young people's narratives to enable them to 'restory' their lives and plan for positive and practical change.

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