

# 1 Researching Young People's Lives: An Introduction

Young people's lives are a source of curiosity and intrigue within contemporary societies, as indeed they have been for a very long time. Open any newspaper and you will encounter any number of familiar and regularly recycled storylines relating to 'the youth of today': be it the nation's latest 'youngest mum', the brave young survivor of cancer, the one-person juvenile crime wave, the youthful academic prodigy, the teenaged sporting hero ... the list goes on. Taken as a measure of what society might look like in the future as successive cohorts reach adulthood, the attitudes and experiences of younger generations are constantly picked over and subjected to close scrutiny, with regular pronouncements then made about both the current state of the nation and its prospects for the years ahead. Following the spate of teenage shootings in London in early 2007, for example, the leader of the UK Conservative Party, David Cameron, proclaimed, 'That's what our society's now come to: teenagers shooting other teenagers in their homes at point-blank range. I think what we need is to recognise our society is badly broken and we need to make some big changes, starting now.' (Owen, 2007) Young people's lives are then frequently held up as a 'social barometer' of wider societal change (Jones and Wallace, 1992), whether for good or ill, and as such are constantly in the spotlight.

Social researchers are by no means exempt from this fascination with young people's lives. Over the last 100 years, social scientists from a diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds have attempted to explain society's fascination with youth as a life stage, have provided detailed descriptive accounts of different facets of young people's lives and have advanced various theoretical frameworks for understanding their experiences. Key to these processes has been the development and implementation of effective strategies for researching youth. Given the scale of this endeavour, there are surprisingly few current textbooks which focus

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exclusively on the specific methodological challenges of conducting youth research. McLeod and Malone (2000) and Bennett et al. (2003) are notable exceptions, both entitled *Researching Youth* and both providing fascinating insider accounts of issues of method arising from specific examples of youth research. Other books in this field, though, have tended to conflate the challenges of youth research with those of childhood research (e.g., Fraser et al., 2003; Kellett et al., 2003; Best, 2007). Amy Best's edited collection *Representing Youth: Methodological Issues in Critical Youth Studies*, for example, is an important and valuable contribution to the field, yet the book includes as many chapters on research with young children as it does on youth research. Best justifies this coverage on the basis of the degree of commonality between childhood and youth research. We would not deny that there are indeed important areas of methodological overlap between the two traditions, nor that youth researchers and childhood researchers might not have much to learn from each other. Nonetheless, as we argue below, we still want to insist on the distinctiveness of youth research, not just because of its distinct histories, theoretical perspectives, methods and key literatures, but also due to what we believe to be young people's distinctive position within society relative to all other groups – including relative to children.

In this book we seek to make a contribution to filling this void by presenting an overview of some of the key methodological challenges associated specifically with researching young people's lives and by providing an introduction to a broad repertoire of methods which are particularly well suited to youth-orientated research. Our book is targeted primarily at novice researchers, in particular students studying and researching in the broad area of youth studies, including those pursuing specialist youth studies-related degree programmes and youth work qualifications, as well as students opting for individual youth-related units of study or conducting youth-related dissertations within broader social science degree programmes. We hope that it will also appeal to practitioners engaged in evaluation of service provision to young people, as well as to established youth researchers who might wish to explore the potential of using a different set of methods to those with which they are already familiar. Throughout the book we place an emphasis on research *in practice*, drawing on examples of recent youth research from a wide range of disciplines and substantive areas, and from a range of both UK and non-UK contexts.

A book of this kind is timely given that recent years have seen a rekindled interest in the academic study of young people's lives. In part, this has been spurred by a renewal of theoretical debate within youth studies, concerning issues as diverse as the ongoing relevance or otherwise of subcultural theory, the validity of the individualisation thesis in understanding young people's lives in late modernity, the extent to which certain risk behaviours have been 'normalised' amongst contemporary youth

and the increasingly blurred boundaries between youth and adulthood. In the UK context, this rekindling of interest has also been fuelled by New Labour's focus over the last decade on youth intervention strategies as a key tool for tackling social exclusion and promoting wider social inclusion. Strategies such as Connexions – the New Deal for Young People – and policies such as those which seek to reduce teenage pregnancy rates or to lower the incidence of various forms of anti-social behaviour have all generated considerable interest amongst youth researchers, and have provided many opportunities for both official and unofficial policy evaluation.

In parallel with this resurgence of substantive and theoretical interest within youth studies, there has also been a renewed interest in the specific methods by which young people's lives can be researched, as well as a broadening of the range of methods now commonly used by youth researchers. Whilst tried and tested methods such as interviews and surveys remain widely used, there is also a much greater willingness amongst youth researchers to draw on a more diverse repertoire of methods of data collection and approaches to analysis, not least those made possible by advances in new technologies. This broadened repertoire includes, then, the use of visual approaches, such as photo elicitation, spatial mapping techniques and video diaries (often used within broader ethnographic studies); 'mobile methods', such as research 'walkabouts'; internet-based methods, such as web surveys, email interviewing, and discourse and conversation analysis of website/chat room content; participatory and peer-led approaches to youth research; the growing use of narrative and biographical interviewing and techniques of analysis; longitudinal qualitative approaches and the re-use of existing qualitative data; and a developing interest in comparative methods. Whilst methods and approaches such as these are by no means unique to researching the experiences of young people, we argue that their deployment within the context of youth research does nonetheless raise a wide range of methodological issues which *are* specific to researching young people as opposed to other groups, not least because of the very specific contexts within which much youth research is conducted. Our book then is timely in reflecting upon the applicability to youth research of more general methodological developments within the social sciences.

A crucial issue in making the case for the distinctiveness of youth research relates to our working definition of this life stage and the degree to which it is possible to draw a clear distinction between childhood and youth on the one hand, and youth and adulthood on the other. Many social scientists argue – as we do – that each of these life stages is both a culturally and historically specific construction. Some argue for the existence of a new life stage between childhood and youth populated by a group popularly referred to as 'the tweenies', and

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there is strong evidence for the parallel emergence of 'young adulthood' as a distinct new life stage between youth and adulthood (e.g., Heath and Cleaver, 2003; Arnett, 2004). Most social scientists would almost certainly point to the difficulties of aligning these different life stages with specific age-based boundaries. Nonetheless, in our view it remains important to distinguish between these different life stages wherever possible – not least because young people themselves tend to be acutely aware of these distinctions and of the extension or withdrawal of rights and privileges which attend them. In practical terms, then, this book sets out to focus on issues which are broadly relevant to the conduct of research with young people in their mid-teens to mid-twenties, although these boundaries should by no means be seen as fixed nor impermeable. Incidentally, such a focus is broadly in line with the United Nation's definition of youth in terms of those aged 15 to 24 years old. When we draw comparisons throughout the book with research on *children*, we are generally referring to research involving individuals younger than this specific age group.

We acknowledge that this nonetheless represents a broad age grouping, and that a 15 year old and a 24 year old might have very little in common beyond the label of 'youth'. However, in the context of ongoing debates concerning the consequences of 'delayed' transitions to adulthood, the lives of many young people in their early to mid-twenties remain characterised by a relative freedom from many of the traditional markers of 'adult' status, such as permanent employment, settling down with a long-term partner, parenthood and independent housing arrangements, with some writers claiming further that many twenty-somethings deliberately seek to distance themselves from the concept of adulthood and instead cling to the distinctiveness of youth (du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Côté, 2000; Arnett, 2004).

### The distinctiveness of youth research

In certain respects, many of the methodological issues and choices facing youth researchers are no different from those facing any group of social researchers. All researchers have to grapple with the challenges of gaining access, selecting an appropriate sample, choosing the most appropriate research method, and working out how best to analyse their research data. However, there are a number of features which are unique to the conduct of youth research as opposed to other forms of research – including childhood research – and which in combination create a case for the distinctiveness of youth research. This section explores four key contextual factors. First, young people's lives are structured by a range of age-specific contexts and institutions, such as educational institutions, training programmes, and leisure activities and subcultures targeted specifically at

young people. Second, their lives are framed by age-specific policies, such as an age-regulated social security regime and various other government initiatives which target specific age groups. Third, youth is constructed as a critical time of transition and individual development within the life course, and as such there is widespread societal concern with the monitoring of young people's lives. Finally, and by no means of least importance, young people are a relatively powerless group within the research process for reasons which are often specific to their life phase, and which therefore necessitate particular attention during the research process. Each of these factors has important implications for the specific nature of youth research as opposed to other forms of research, and we consider each in turn.

### **The age-specific institutional and spatial contexts of young people's lives**

Young people experience many aspects of their lives in highly age-segregated contexts, contexts which separate them out from other age groups. This is a feature of the 'institutionalisation' of the lives of different age groups, whereby individuals spend large amounts of time in age-structured institutions which serve to reinforce distinctions between those different age groups, and which often construct young people as marginal to 'adult' concerns. Educational institutions such as schools and colleges, for instance, are central to the lives of many young people, with chronological age being a key organisational feature. Students typically progress through educational institutions according to increasing age rather than achievement per se, whilst privileges such as the relaxation of strict uniform codes or access to common room space are also often attached to increasing age. With the rapid expansion of higher education amongst young people over the last 15 years or so, many universities and colleges of higher education have also become more homogeneous in terms of age than perhaps used to be the case.

Outside of these formal institutions, young people may spend large amounts of their time in leisure sites which, whether intentionally or by default, are also structured by age, such as youth clubs, student pubs and nightclubs. They may participate in junior leagues of sports clubs, play in youth orchestras, read books and magazines targeted specifically at young people, sign up to youth-dominated social networking websites such as MySpace, holiday with companies such as Club 18–30, participate in the youth organisations of various religious groups, take part in age-specific developmental activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme or the Millennium Volunteers, seek advice from age-specific one-stop-shops, and join age-specific organised groups such as the Venture Scouts or the Air Cadets, or the youth sections of political parties and pressure groups. The living arrangements of young

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people who have left the parental home may also be marked by a high degree of age homogeneity, whether living in halls of residence, peer shared households, local authority care homes, foyers, hostels, young offenders' institutions or military barracks.

Young people, then, spend very large amounts of time with other young people, and often develop a stronger allegiance to their peer groups than to more age-diverse social groupings. Children's lives are of course also strongly shaped by their involvement in age-specific institutions, but child-centred institutions tend to segregate them from most of the institutions referred to above: in other words, children and young people tend not to occupy the *same* institutional spaces. Even within secondary schools, which have the greatest potential for the blurring of divisions between different age groups, pupils spend most of their time corralled into classroom spaces according to their specific age. Not only do child-centred institutions and spaces tend to be distinct from those serving older groups, children also spend far more of their time under the direct supervision of adults, whether those adults are professionals of various kinds or family members. In all of these ways, age differences are constantly reinforced, and often by young people themselves.

### The policy contexts of young people's lives

Young people's lives are also circumscribed by age-specific policies and laws which mark them out as belonging to a separate category of the population to both adults and children and which serve to legitimate their differential treatment. As Mizzen has noted, 'the simple fact of possessing a certain biological age brings with it differential access to social power, while age also provides the means through which young people are brought into a more or less common relationship with many of the central institutions of modern life' (2003: 9). Their status as 'not yet adult' is strongly linked to the widespread view that young people are 'citizens in the making' and as such do not deserve equal treatment in policy terms. For example, the UK's social security system does not treat most young people as fully adult, and hence eligible for higher rates of benefit, until the age of 25. Similarly, minimum wage legislation is not universally applied to all young workers, but is based on distinctions between different groups of workers according to age. Connexions has been targeted at young people aged 13 to 19, whilst government training schemes such as Apprenticeships and the New Deal for Young People are targeted at those aged 16 to 24 and 18 to 24 respectively.

Furthermore, young people in their mid-to-late teens are specifically targeted by various government initiatives aimed at tackling social exclusion 'in the bud', including anti-truancy measures, measures to tackle school exclusions, and policies targeted at reducing teenage pregnancies.

More generally, age-related legislation with respect to the attainment of various rights and responsibilities is also complex, with young people treated as adults for different purposes at different ages. For example, in the UK a young person is allowed to work part-time at 13, can enter a public house but not drink alcohol at 14, is legally permitted to drink alcohol and have sex at 16, can go to war and obtain a licence to drive most vehicles at 17, can vote, buy cigarettes and tobacco, buy alcohol in a bar and get a tattoo at 18, and can stand for election to Parliament at 21. The lives of young people in their mid teens to mid-twenties are, then, arguably subject to far greater levels of state regulation and control than the lives of younger children – and possibly the lives of older groups, too.

### The monitoring of youth transitions

The degree to which young people's lives are circumscribed by age-specific policies is not unrelated to broader societal concerns regarding the need to monitor their transitions to adulthood. Youth is constructed both in popular and in much academic discourse as a key period of transition and change, marked by individual development from the status of 'child', through 'youth', and onwards towards 'adulthood'. As a buffer zone between childhood and adulthood, youth as a life stage has taken on a special status, as a time when young people are regarded as being particularly vulnerable to risk-taking and negative influences. Developmental psychologists often characterise this phase as being marked by 'storm and stress' and various manifestations of more or less acceptable experimentation, representing what Erik Erikson famously referred to as the 'psychosocial moratorium' of adolescence. As such, young people are deemed to require special guidance and protection from adults, on the back of which a vast 'industry' of youth intervention agencies has emerged over the years: educational and developmental psychologists, careers advisers, Connexions personal advisers, youth workers, counsellors, youth offending teams, mentors, teachers, social workers – all concerned in one way or another with monitoring the lives of young people and with ensuring that, as far as possible, they are able to remain upon the straight and narrow during a key transitional period of their lives.

Young people are popularly regarded, then, as important less because of who they are in the here and now but because of *who or what they may or may not become* in the future. Wyn and White sum this up in the following terms: 'if youth is the state of "becoming", adulthood is the "arrival". At the same time, youth is also "not adult", a deficit of the adult state' (1997: 11). Youth is consequently constructed as a make or break developmental stage, thereby justifying the high levels of intervention

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within the lives of many young people. Researchers do not stand outside of this circle of observation and surveillance, but by definition are unavoidably complicit in its perpetuation, a point to which we return in the final section of this chapter.

### **The relative powerlessness of young people**

Finally, youth research is distinctive because of the relative powerlessness of young people within the research process itself when compared with other groups. In this respect, youth research does indeed share much in common with childhood research. For example, and as we explore in Chapter 2, the involvement of under-16 year olds in research is subject to various legal considerations, whilst research access to youth-oriented institutions is invariably governed by gatekeepers of various kinds rather than by young people themselves. Young people are likely to have less informed knowledge of the nature of research involvement than older people, yet at the same time might be more amenable to requests to participate, even though it may not always be in their interests to do so. They may be coerced into research, whether directly by institutional gatekeepers or unscrupulous researchers, or more subtly as a consequence of the power dynamics which attend most youth-oriented research, whereby research is invariably conducted by someone older than the research participant. Moreover, specific efforts might be made by researchers to make the research an enjoyable rather than a boring experience through the use of 'youth-friendly' research methods, or young people might be offered payment for their involvement, yet even these well intentioned strategies might be construed as subtle forms of coercion. These concerns are by no means absent from research with other groups, but they are arguably amplified in the context of research with younger participants.

Partly in response to an increased awareness of the imbalance of the power dynamics which attend relationships between adults and young people, there has been a growing emphasis in recent years on the importance of respecting and indeed foregrounding young people's autonomy and social agency, both in the realm of social research and in the realm of youth policy. Whilst critical youth researchers have been highlighting these concerns for many years (see for example Griffin, 1993; Cohen, 1996), the dramatic rise of the new sociology of childhood has brought these concerns to the fore for a new generation of researchers, and has in turn impacted upon the conduct of youth research. The discursive shift within childhood studies from viewing children as 'objects' of research towards a view which stresses their competency and agency, often as co-participants in the research process, grants 'central and autonomous conceptual status' (Christiansen and Prout, 2002: 481) to children and refuses to take pre-existing distinctions between adults and children for granted. Such a perspective compels

researchers to reject notions of children's essential vulnerability and/or incompetence, and to enter into 'a dialogue that recognises commonality but also honours difference' (2002: 480). Similar concerns face researchers working with young people, many of whom seek to challenge young people's relative powerlessness within their own research practice by attempting to 'democratise' the research process (France, 2004). Some of the ways in which researchers might seek to engage with these concerns within their own research practice are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

In sum, then, youth research is distinctive from research on other groups. It tends to be conducted in youth-specific contexts from which both children and adults are often excluded, is affected by and is often related to young people's experiences of youth-specific policies and interventions, is implicated in the broader scrutiny of their lives at an important transitional and developmental moment, and places young people in a relatively powerless position in relation to the research process. Young people's lives and experiences are of course hugely diverse, and are differentiated by characteristics such as social class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, health status and geographical location. Nonetheless, these four broad factors, which determine the contexts in which young people live their lives, are more or less universally shared. Given this distinctiveness, and not least the well established nature of youth studies as an academic tradition, it is surprising to us that there are so few textbooks currently available which focus exclusively on researching youth. In contrast, the relatively new field of childhood studies has generated a plethora of methodologically-orientated textbooks specifically focused on research with children (e.g., Christensen and James, 2000; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Kellett et al., 2003; Lewis et al., 2004; Hogan and Greene, 2004). In our view, it is time that youth studies caught up with childhood studies in this respect. Given the multidisciplinary nature of youth research, it is certainly not for want of researchers with important and interesting things to say about methodological issues, as the many examples drawn upon in this book will illustrate.

## Traditions of youth research

Youth studies is a broad church; it embraces research on all aspects of young people's lives, and youth researchers are to be found across all social science disciplines. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a number of distinct research traditions and disciplinary perspectives within that broad church, each to some extent also characterised by distinct methodological traditions.

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### Developmental psychology

There is a long tradition of research on young people's lives within developmental psychology, from G. Stanley Hall's 'discovery' of adolescence in the early twentieth century, Erik Erikson's work on identity in the 1950s, through to contemporary research on the changing nature of youth and adolescence (e.g., Apter, 2001; Bradford Brown et al., 2002; Mortimer and Larson, 2002; Arnett, 2004). Developmental psychologists tend to refer to 'adolescence' rather than 'youth' as a central concept in their work, and their focus is on the importance of this phase in young people's social and psychological development. Much research within this tradition draws upon survey methods and experimental design, although recently there has been a shift towards the adoption of a more critical and more qualitatively-orientated approach, including the use of methods drawing on narrative and psychoanalytic approaches (see Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Richardson, 2002; Camic et al., 2003). Notwithstanding this more critical tradition, there is a general tendency to focus on adolescence as a potentially problematic period within this body of research, including a concern with the identification of risk factors which enable psychologists and others to identify young people most at risk from particular problems or behaviours. Key journals publishing research from within this tradition include the *Journal of Adolescence*, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *Journal of Adolescent Research* and *Youth and Society*.

### Educational research

Educational research is a multidisciplinary endeavour with a common focus on educational experiences and processes within both institutional and non-institutional settings. Unsurprisingly, much educational research has a direct or indirect focus on the lives of young people, whether as formal or informal learners, as members of school-based youth subcultures, as those experiencing the sharp end of educational reforms, as agents of educational choice, or as the focus of any number of other educationally-orientated topics. Reflecting the diverse disciplinary backgrounds represented within the educational research community, there is no one dominant methodology in use. Rather, educational researchers interested in exploring young people's lives have traditionally drawn upon a wide repertoire of research tools (see Cohen et al., 2007). Educational research can, however, be justifiably proud of its rich tradition of ethnographic studies of school life, an approach which in recent years has had much to contribute to broader youth studies debates concerning youth and identity, including in relation to sexuality, masculinities and femininities, ethnicity and class, and the various intersections between them (e.g., Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Ball et al., 2000; Gordon et al., 2000). Educational research is published in a vast array of

journals, although some of the best youth-focused research is located in journals such as the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Gender and Education* and the *Journal of Education and Work*.

### Cultural Studies

The origins of the field of cultural studies lie within youth-orientated research. In the US, cultural studies has its roots in the traditions of the Chicago School, which pioneered some of the classic ethnographic studies of 'deviant youth' in the last century (e.g., Thrasher, 1927; Shaw, 1930). In the UK, cultural studies is associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s with a series of mostly abstract studies of working class male youth sub-cultures (e.g., Hall and Jefferson, 1976). These more theoretical accounts were supplanted from the mid-1980s onwards by a return to a more ethnographically-orientated tradition (Bennett, 2002), including more recently the growing use of internet-based methods such as the observation of chat rooms, blogs and other social networking sites. The predominant focus of youth research from within the cultural studies tradition has centred on various forms of popular culture, including young people's engagement with music, the media, new technologies and other leisure pursuits. Recently, however, there has been a shift away from the language of youth 'subcultures' towards the alternative language of 'scenes', '(neo)tribes' and 'lifestyles', a shift which has also highlighted the blurring of the age boundaries formerly associated with various subcultural pursuits. Nonetheless, music-based subcultures remain a popular theme within cultural studies-influenced youth research (e.g., Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004). Youth research from within this tradition is published in a broad range of journals, including *Young: The Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, *Journal of Youth Studies* and *Youth Studies Australia*, as well as mainstream journals such as *Leisure Studies*, *Cultural Studies* and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

### Youth transitions research

Youth transitions research represents a dominant – some would argue hegemonic – strand of youth research. Largely conducted by sociologists, educational researchers, social policy researchers and economists, this is a policy-orientated approach which has traditionally focused predominantly on school-to-work transitions and, to a lesser extent, domestic and housing transitions. More recently, researchers such as MacDonald and Marsh (2005) have incorporated parallel transitions focused on, for example, drug careers or criminal careers. Youth transitions research has its origins in the collapse of the youth labour market in the late 1970s and early 1980s and is often concerned with mapping

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the structural contexts of young people's changing transitions to adulthood. There is a strong strand of research within this tradition based upon the quantitative secondary analysis of large scale data sets, including longitudinal analysis of cohort study data such as the UK's Youth Cohort Study and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70). There is also a more qualitatively-orientated strand linked to this approach, and in recent years transitions researchers have made increasing use of both narrative/biographical and qualitative longitudinal approaches (e.g., Henderson et al., 2006). Research associated with the youth transitions tradition is regularly published in journals such as the *Journal of Youth Studies*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Journal of Education and Work*, *Youth and Policy*, and *Youth Studies Australia*.

### Social and cultural geography

Over the last decade an exciting new strand of youth research has emerged from the work of social and cultural geographers, much of it with a qualitative focus (e.g., Skelton and Valentine, 1997; Malbon, 1999; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Panelli et al., 2007). A growing body of work has focused on the broad theme of youth and spatiality, embracing issues as diverse as place, space and youth identity; rural youth; young people's leisure spaces, including virtual leisure spaces; the gendering of youth space; and contested youth space. The impact of this new focus on 'geographies of youth' has been felt outside of the discipline through a growing focus in youth research more generally on the significance of place, space and time in young people's lives, and through the adoption of new research techniques such as spatial mapping exercises and the use of 'interviews on the move' (see Chapters 5 and 7). Specialist geography journals which publish youth research from within this tradition include *Children's Geographies* and *Children, Youth and Environment*.

### Feminist youth research and 'girl studies'

Much early youth research took as its primary focus the lives of young men, sometimes referred to as 'the gangs of lads' model of youth research. In their now famous critique of this trend, McRobbie and Garber (1976) attempted to explain the marginalisation of young women within youth research and issued a call to arms for researchers to foreground the lives of young women. Christine Griffin's *Typical Girls* (1985) was a landmark study in this regard, a feminist riposte to classic boy-centred studies such as Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977). In the years since, there has been a consistent feminist critique of 'malestream' youth research, although it is still the case that studies specifically focusing on young women's lives remain relatively few and far between. Feminist youth researchers can be located across all of the

traditions highlighted above, although much of this work has come together in recent years under the umbrella of 'girl studies' (see for example Harris, 2004), including a considerable amount of work coming from the perspectives of either cultural studies or critical social psychology (e.g., McRobbie, 2000; Best, 2000; Walkerdine et al., 2000). Feminist youth research, like feminist research more generally, tends to be qualitative in its methodological focus, and is often explicitly concerned with the empowerment of young women as a research outcome, incorporating action research and various participatory approaches to achieve this aim (see Chapter 4). Key outlets for feminist youth research include *Feminism and Psychology*, *Gender and Education* and *Feminist Review*.

Youth researchers are also located within other disciplines and fields of study, including criminology, social policy, health research, social history, political science and anthropology: each with their own distinct methodological traditions and preferences. Youth research is, then, characterised by a wide diversity of approaches, a diversity which embraces a variety of methodological and disciplinary traditions, and which we seek to do justice to in the many research examples we draw upon within this book. Increasingly there are moves towards interdisciplinarity and methodological pluralism in the conduct of youth research, a point to which we will return in the conclusion to this chapter. Regardless of approach, however, there remains a central dilemma for youth researchers which we deal with in the following section.

### **The youth researcher's dilemma: research as objectification**

Many, if not most, researchers who choose to work in the area of youth studies do so at least in part out of a strong sense of commitment to challenging the ways in which young people's lives are popularly (mis)represented, and possibly out of a hope that by so doing they might contribute to the improvement of their lives. Much youth research is hence concerned with giving voice to young people and to promoting a better understanding of their worlds. Most researchers would probably seek to take their responsibilities to young people in this regard very seriously and as such would endorse the exhortations of Stephen and Squires, that youth researchers should neither portray young people as 'victims or dupes to structure' nor 'erroneously celebrate them as completely free actors' for ideological purposes: instead, that 'we must simply listen to what young people themselves have to say when making sense of their own lives' (2003: 161). Dwyer and Wyn (2001) make a similar point when they

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caution youth researchers to avoid the polarised and equally unhelpful positions of either demonising or romanticising young people's lives.

Part of this manifest concern with giving young people a voice is linked to a desire amongst many youth researchers to empower young people, in a context where so many aspects of their lives are objectified and held up to (often negative) scrutiny. Nonetheless, a central dilemma remains for youth researchers: namely the ever-present danger that their own research endeavours have the unintended consequence of further objectifying young people's lives, bringing them under yet another manifestation of the expert's gaze. Peter Kelly has written widely on this theme (see for example Kelly, 2003 and 2006) and has argued that the discourse of academic youth research, even in seeking the promotion of a 'better understanding' of their worlds, is as complicit in the objectification, control and governance of young people as any other expert discourse:

This constantly growing research literature promises to develop more 'sophisticated' ways of identifying populations of young people with regard to various community and policy concerns ... In this sense, Youth Studies, as a diverse, heterogeneous, but recognisable institutionally located intellectual activity, emerges as such so that Youth, in all its variety, can be made knowable in ways that promise to make the government of Youth possible. (Kelly, 2003: 169)

By making young people's lives 'knowable' in these ways, youth researchers – who so often are concerned with exposing the extent to which young people's lives are subject to the control of various external forces – instead find themselves contributing to the governance of young people's lives alongside various other youth 'experts' and professionals. Griffin (2001) has argued that such forms of knowledge also tend to inadvertently reinforce popular notions of young people as either 'troubled' or 'in trouble'. Her earlier identification of mainstream versus radical traditions of youth research (Griffin, 1993) made an important and timely point concerning the significance of the specific motivations and political ideologies underpinning the work of different groups of youth researchers throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. However, the implication of Kelly's argument is that the consequences for young people may well be indistinguishable in terms of effectively laying bare the lives of young people for others to pick over.

Best has noted that 'despite being the subject of nearly a century of research', for much of that time young people have been 'largely excluded from the very social processes through which knowledge about them is collected' (2007: 14). One way in which youth researchers have attempted to circumvent these specific difficulties has been to seek the replacement of research *on* young people by research *with* young

people through the promotion of various forms of participatory and action research. France (2004) refers to the rise of approaches which hand over control of the research process to young people in this way as a 'new orthodoxy' within youth research; one which has emerged in parallel with a growing emphasis within government policy on youth participation. Whilst there are many strengths and benefits associated with this approach, many of which are discussed in Chapter 4, the emphasis on giving voice to young people can nonetheless still be used in ways which can, albeit unwittingly or unintentionally, further reinforce the objectification of young people's lives – paradoxically, achieved by the actions of young people themselves. Writing about what she refers to as a 'new watchfulness in youth research, policy and popular culture', Harris (2004), for example, has noted the extent to which young people are now subject not only to the 'perpetual everyday observation' of their lives by various groups of youth experts, but are also themselves actively engaged in forms of 'self-monitoring'. This is not just about the emergence of a new social obligation for young people to make their views known through forms of self-governance. Rather, it is as much about a requirement within societies which are increasingly subject to the forces of individualisation that young people should view their lives as unique biographical projects (see for example du Bois-Reymond, 1998):

(Young people) are not only obliged to manage their own life trajectories, but are enticed to display this management for the scrutiny of experts and observers. The obligation for youth to become unique individuals is therefore constructed as a freedom, a freedom best expressed through the display of one's choices and projects of the self. The current focus on placing young people in schools, workplaces and appropriate recreational centers [sic], and in hearing from them, for example, in youth citizenship debates, can be understood as related to this trend toward exhibition of one's biographical project. (Harris, 2004: 6)

All of these points need to be taken very seriously by youth researchers, and in the light of such arguments it is important that we reflect upon our motivations for engaging in youth research, both as a profession and as individual researchers. We do not, however, see this as a counsel of despair, or regard youth research as a lost cause. Youth research remains an important enterprise, contributing to a greater understanding of broader processes of social change and, critically, providing important opportunities for young people, if we allow them to set the agenda in a context within which their voices are all too often ignored or underplayed. We need, then, to view youth research as a fundamentally political enterprise; to do less is to do a disservice to the young people with whom we seek to work.

## Structure of the book

To repeat our central aim: in this book we seek to present an overview of some of the key methodological challenges associated specifically with researching young people's lives and to provide an introduction to a broad repertoire of methods which are particularly well-suited to youth-orientated research. The rest of the book is split into two parts. In Chapters 2 to 4 we consider some broad methodological and contextual concerns of relevance to the design and conduct of youth research. Chapter 2 focuses on the ethical imperatives which should underpin research involving young people, and in particular considers the significance of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality to the process of youth research. We highlight the importance of respecting young people's agency and competency within this process, which in practice is not always easy to achieve given the specific contexts within which much youth research is conducted. In Chapter 3 we explore a range of issues in relation to the conduct of youth research 'across difference', including a consideration of the impact on the research process of a researcher's individual identity, including the significance of their gender, ethnicity, sexuality and age, and some of the challenges associated with conducting research amongst groups of young people who are effectively 'hidden' or difficult to access. Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on the ways in which youth researchers can involve young people as active participants in the research process, not just in terms of ensuring that their voices and perspectives are included as research data, but in the organisation and conduct of the research process more generally.

The second part of the book focuses on the use of specific research methods in the conduct of youth research. Chapter 5 is concerned with the use of interviews in youth research, perhaps the most widely used method within youth studies, Chapter 6 explores the contribution of ethnographic studies to youth research, focusing specifically on the use of participant and non-participant observation as a research tool, whilst Chapter 7 explores some of the possibilities afforded by the increasingly widespread use of visual research methods in researching young people's lives. Chapter 8 focuses on the use of surveys in youth research, another very commonly used research method; Chapter 9 considers the possibilities of using existing data sources in youth research, including the use of official statistics, large scale survey data and archived qualitative data, whilst Chapter 10 considers the potential for using the internet in youth research, both as a means of gathering data and as a source of data in its own right.

The chapters in part two of the book undeniably give greater weight to qualitative approaches to youth research, but this should be viewed as a reflection of the field of youth studies, rather than a statement on our part about the relative merits of different methodological traditions. In practice, a great deal of youth research utilises a mixed methods

approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2006; Bryman, 2006), drawing on a variety of different methods in order to explore a particular research question. Often this will involve a mixture of different qualitative approaches – the use of observation, interviews and visual methods within the same study, for example – but may equally involve a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, such as a questionnaire survey deployed alongside focus groups. A mixed methods approach may sometimes privilege data generated by one method over another, for example by using focus groups principally to highlight potential themes for inclusion in a large scale survey, or by using statistical data sources as a backdrop to an essentially qualitative study. On other occasions, researchers might seek to integrate different methods in more imaginative ways, and Mason (2006) provides a useful discussion of some of the ways in which this task might be conceptualised.

It should be noted, however, that the various methods which we highlight in this book are subject to various – and often disputed – claims concerning their *epistemological* underpinnings, which for many researchers carry implications for the ways in which methods can, if at all, be legitimately ‘mixed and matched’. Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the validity of our assumed knowledge of the social world, including the status of the knowledge which specific methods are able to generate. It is concerned with claims about what counts as *valid* knowledge of the social world, and is related to debates about the applicability or otherwise to the *social* sciences of methods for generating knowledge which are derived from the *natural* sciences. Two epistemological positions which are commonly invoked in these debates are those of *positivism* and *interpretivism*. Positivism views the methods of the natural sciences as entirely appropriate for use in social scientific research and thus tends to emphasise the importance of the tangible measurement of ‘facts’ in developing our knowledge of the social world, whilst interpretivism eschews the idea that the methods of the natural sciences can be applied to the social world and instead emphasises the subjective meaning of social action. Quantitative research methods are often associated with the former position (by qualitative researchers, if not by quantitative researchers themselves), and qualitative methods tend to be associated with the latter, although Bryman (1988) has questioned the extent to which these are *necessary* associations. Nonetheless, for some researchers these assumed associations place qualitative and quantitative approaches in conflict and render problematic their use in combination within a mixed methods research design. These debates, which until relatively recently tended to dominate discussions concerning mixed methods, have often been referred to as ‘the paradigm wars’ between qualitative and quantitative approaches. Whilst the issues underpinning these discussions are still very important ones, in recent years there has been a move away from the epistemological debate about the validity of mixed approaches towards a more practically-oriented debate, and for many researchers the greatest

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challenge is now seen to lie in working out how, in practical terms, different methods can be best combined in pursuit of social scientific knowledge (Bryman, 2006; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2006).

Finally, readers should note that it is not our intention to provide a straightforward 'how to' guide to the use of specific methods, nor to enter into detailed discussions of their epistemological underpinnings, although we do nonetheless provide pointers and guidance along the way. Rather, we seek to highlight a range of issues which are particularly relevant to the use of these various methods in the context of youth research. There is a vast array of both general and specialist introductory research methods textbooks which provide a much better introduction to all of these issues than we are able to do within the remit of this book, and at the end of each chapter we provide references to some of the best of these. Our hope is that our book will not only inspire you to find out more about the various methodological issues we discuss, but that it will also give you the confidence to gain first hand experience of researching young people's lives within a research project of your own.

### Suggestions for further reading

Bryman, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. This is A comprehensive introductory text on all aspects of the research process, including epistemological issues, and probably the best general introduction currently available. This book also has a publisher-supported website containing links to a very broad range of methods-related resources: [www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199264469/](http://www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199264469/)

Bennett, A., Cieslik, M. and Miles, S. (2003) *Researching Youth*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. This is A fascinating edited collection based on insider accounts of issues of method arising from specific examples of British youth research.

Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (2007) *Young People and Social Change*, Buckingham: Open University Press. This provides an excellent overview of many current issues in youth studies, grounded in a critique of Beck's individualisation thesis.

France, A. (2007) *Understanding Youth in Late Modernity*, Buckingham: Open University Press. This is Another insightful introduction to key themes in youth studies, including a good historical overview.

McLeod, J. and Malone, K. (2000) *Researching Youth*, Hobart: Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies. This is Another engrossing edited collection, this time based on examples of youth research from Australia.