

Ross N.J. (2007) 'On the go: Conducting and representing mobilities research', paper presented at the 'Developing 'mobile' methods seminar', 12th June 2007, Cardiff University, Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University

Introduction (slide 2)

This presentation is divided into two parts. It focuses firstly on the use of mobile methods in research conducted with 'looked after' children and young people on their everyday lives. It then moves on to discuss the use of self-directed photography as a method for researching children's mobilities. The first part of the presentation draws on research currently being conducted here at Cardiff University with 'looked after' children and young people. (Extra)ordinary lives: Children's Everyday Relationship Cultures in Public Care. This on-going research adopts a multi-method and multi-media, ethnographic and participatory, collaborative approach, researching with children and young people to explore and represent their everyday relationship cultures and identity practices. The second half of the presentation takes the form of a photo essay entitled: my journey to school ... Whilst the photo essay plays I'll discuss use of self-directed photography as a method for researching children's mobilities, in this case, the school journey.

Part 1: The (Extra)ordinary Lives project – (slide 3)

(Extra)ordinary lives: Children's Everyday Relationship Cultures in Public Care is one of the demonstrator projects carried out through the interdisciplinary QUALITI research centre here at Cardiff University. It focuses on the everyday lives of 'looked after' children and young people, providing accounts that do not focus simply on the range of social problems that children in care may face. Much of what is written about these children highlights their poor educational, emotional, behavioural and health prospects and outcomes and represents their lives only as they relate to the looked after system. This project aims to enable a group of 'looked after' children and young people to produce their own accounts and representations of their everyday lives, their own multi-media identity projects – i.e. how they feel about being routinely positioned by professionals as 'looked after' or 'in care' and how they experience their everyday relationships and identities as they negotiate old and new settings, institutions, peers and carers given the multiple transitions and dislocations from families, friends and wider social networks and communities. The research adopts a participatory, collaborative approach with children and young people choosing how to be involved, what they wish to produce and what they wish to share with the research team. The research also adopts an ethnographic approach, recording and exploring the possibilities and challenges of enabling the active participation of these children and young people in the research process, from design through to dissemination.

Multi-media project sessions – (slide 4)

The '(Extra)ordinary Lives' research project is based around a multi-media project, 'me, myself and I' that runs fortnightly with the group of 'looked after' children and young people taking part in the research. So far 9 children and young people have taken part in the study, aged from 10 to 20, all white, 7 girls and 2 boys, with 3 in kinship care, 5 in foster care and 1 living independently. Fieldwork commenced in October 2006 with the first 'me, myself and I' project session. These fortnightly sessions will continue until July 07. Each session lasts about 6 hours with individual children usually coming for a couple of hours each time, though sometimes staying longer. These multi-media sessions facilitate the development of the multi-media identity projects. We are making available a range of activities that can be taken-up by children and young people either as one-off productions or if they wanted, longer projects:

- film-making
- digital photography
- photographic/textual/oral diaries
- music productions (e.g. sound-scapes, music mixing)

- animations
- drawing and craft based activities
- scrap books and collages

Using methods like these we hope we can generate a range of diverse representations that disrupt the normative way of representing the lives and relationships of looked-after children.

However there is also much out-of-session contact, with one-to-one relationships being formed between individual children and researchers, and it is this out of session contact and contact when transporting to and from sessions that I want to discuss today.

- digital recordings of car conversations when transporting young people to and from the sessions
- 'guided' walks with young people in their current home localities and places of significance to them

These mobile methods were not a planned part of the research, they have developed through the process of conducting the research and have both proved to be very productive in terms of data generated on young people's everyday lives and in terms of individual relationships built between researchers and young people.

Digital audio recordings of car conversations – (slide 5)

Digital audio recordings made whilst transporting young people to and from the fortnightly project sessions. This was an unplanned part of the research and the method developed as fieldwork commenced when it became apparent that the time and space of the car journey was an important time to build relationships between individual young people and researchers and for conversations between the two to take place. Initially the need to pick up and drop off young people to facilitate their attendance at the project sessions seemed to be a bit of a bind and a practical problem to overcome, planning schedules to collect young people, none of whom lived near to each other. For each session this usually involved the three researchers with cars collecting and dropping off 1 or 2 young people, while the other researcher and the eldest participant, who was employed to help in the project sessions remained at the centre. Pick-up and drop off routines were quickly established and a knock on effect was that this allowed a time and space for one-to-one relationships to be built between young people and researchers.

The mobile experience of the car journey - (slide 6)

Unlike the text book advice regarding ideal conditions for interviews to take place – a private, quiet space, with few distractions or interruptions, audio recorder placed on table between researcher and participant, who sit facing each other – the car space provided a setting in which young people could exercise greater control over the setting and direction of any conversations held.

Importantly the recordings are controlled by the young people themselves. They have the audio recorder and choose when to turn it on and off. For instance, one girl usually records the conversation made during the first half of her journey, then replays this and listens to what has been recorded for the remainder of the journey. The space of the car is a less intimidating setting, with the researcher and young person sitting side by side, with little direct eye contact. It is a noisy space, filled with sounds from places passed en route and with noises created in the car – turning on the radio or playing a tape, turning the volume up and down, singing along. The mobile experience of the journey interrupts and disrupts, as the researcher negotiates the route, alternating focus between being an attentive driver and being an engaged listener and active in the conversation, and as the young person and researcher respond to people, places and things passed and bring these into the conversations. This is not a smooth, flowing encounter, but a stuttering, paused, lost, repeated exchange, within which the intimate is interspersed with the mundane. A key aspect of the conversations is that they are held as part of a routine, the purpose of the car journey is to transport the young person, not to hold an interview, and as such the time of the car journey offers a choice to the young person, to talk and share details of their everyday life with the researcher, from extended accounts, to snippets of information, set in a context of a

conversation within an ordinary routine journey.

'guided' walks – (slide 7)

The 'guided' walks, like the car conversations, create time and space for the researcher and young person to spend together. They place importance on the everyday experiences, routines and perceptions of the young people as they negotiate their current home locations and revisit past home locations. Closeness and distance are experienced as they walk together through young people's localities. They have an unstructured, flexible format, responding to the direction and interests of the young person 'guiding' the researcher through settings familiar to them. The young person having control over the journey, the route, the pace and the pauses, is given a degree of control over the research encounter. Conversations held during the journey are informed by the journey, the places, people and things passed on the way, and cover topics related to the central themes of the research study, as introduced by the researcher and as commented upon by the young person. The unstructured format lends the encounter an openness and the rootedness of the journey in young people's everyday locales gives the conversations an immediacy and connection to young people's everyday experiences.

'Guided' walks in everyday localities – (slide 8)

2 min video shown (not available to view on web version)

The journeys were recorded in varying ways. A camcorder or camera and audio recorder would be taken along and the young person would be given control over what and how to record. In the clip that I'm about to show the young person video recorded much of the journey and for ease I carried the audio recorder and recorded most of the journey, though at times when not filming the young person took the audio recorder. This piece of footage is taken from a recording made by a young person during a 'guided' walk with a researcher around her local area. This footage has been edited by the researcher into a short (nearly 2 minute) clip. The entire recording is about 45 minutes long.

It conveys the experience of the walk, rather than being a polished, conventionally framed video. It captures the feel of the terrain being traversed, the footsteps on the ground, as we walk the route, and the pauses and focusing of attention on places and features of interest to the young person, as the act of filming takes precedence over the act of walking or talking. In the edited version of the walk that I've created for the young person to keep, as per her directions, I've cut out much of the footage recorded as we moved through the area, deleting the camera shaking and footage of the ground, focusing instead on the points at which, she herself stopped and focused. But for the purposes of the research we're conducting I think the raw footage, though not analysed yet, will prove to be insightful, particularly looking at the changing focus, the transitions from motion, conversation, and recording and the meshing of these.

Part 2: Photo essay: My journey to school ...

The second half of the presentation takes the form of a photo essay entitled: my journey to school ... Whilst the photo essay plays I'll discuss use of self-directed photography to explore children's negotiation of their localities focusing on the regular routine of the school journey, and specifically the experiences of those children who walk without adult accompaniment.

Children's mobilities: the school journey

This research on school journeys was conducted with children in Fife, Scotland and formed part of my Phd research (Ross, 2002). Interestingly in contrast to much of what is currently written about children's independent mobility, findings suggested it was common practice for children in the middle years of childhood, to negotiate school journeys independently, 4/5th of children travelled without adult accompaniment to school, most walking.

In the UK much attention has focused on the changing nature of school journeys in recent years. The trend towards increased accompaniment of children, increased use of cars and a decrease in the numbers of children walking on school journeys in the UK has been widely reported (Hillman *et al.*, 1990; O'Brien *et al.*, 2000). Indeed the dominant theme to emerge from much of the UK based research on children's use of their localities over the past decade is control, with issues of social control and spatial exclusion marking children's geographies (McNeish & Roberts, 1995; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Matthews *et al.*, 2000; McKendrick *et al.*, 2000). These studies point to diminishing opportunities for children's independent negotiation of their localities, due to increasing real and perceived dangers and the growing commodification and institutionalisation of childhood. Less well researched is the meaning of school journeys to children. Self-directed photography proved to be an insightful method for exploring children's school journey experiences. The children's photographs of their school journeys captured the variety of environmental settings, routes taken and people and places of significance to children that are combined in school journey experiences. The experiences of children who walked without adult accompaniment on school journeys are focused upon here, highlighting the rich variety of experiences that children's independent negotiation of school journeys can provide.

Utilising self-directed photography

Nearly 90 children aged between ten and twelve years from seven primary schools took part in activity-based research. They were asked to take photographs of places liked, disliked and school journeys, though only their school journey photographs are discussed here. When individual children's photographs were combined there were 361 photographs of their school journeys. Children were free to record what they wished within the remit provided, unhindered by adult intervention, giving them a degree of control within the research process. Children provided written and verbal commentaries on the content and meaning of their photographs, which were then analysed and categorised into broad themes. The photographs and accompanying commentaries were placed alongside the other materials produced by children in the activity sessions, and compiled into individual workbooks. These were referred to during the interviews conducted. This process was key in allowing children's own meanings and associations to be foregrounded. When amassed the photographs represented common themes and attributes that children gave significance to. Further analysis of the photographs and children's commentaries allowed more personal and symbolic meanings to emerge, focusing attention on the local geographies and practices of children and highlighting personal and community identities. In the photo essay individual names and specific locations have been changed. Children's spelling and grammar have not been altered.

Environmental and imaginative engagements

A key advantage of incorporating self-directed photography into the methods used was that it allowed the children involved to convey their movement through, and site themselves in, their everyday environments. Children ably communicated their intimate knowledge of their localities.

The photographs give an indication of the routes taken by children. Remoteness, lack of pavements and the use made of back roads and paths are evident in photographs from village and small town locations. The range of sensations experienced through walking on school journeys in all seasons and weathers is conveyed. They reveal the risks inherent, and strategies and capabilities developed, as children negotiate their localities independently. Roads without pavements in rural areas create problems when negotiating traffic, and were disliked by children. Many of the photographs conveyed a sense of a child's perspective when negotiating everyday surroundings, providing an indication of the differing scales of adult and child environmental interactions. There is some feel for children's lower angle of vision when crossing roads, of impediments to their view, sometimes below rather than above car height.

Through their photographs and accompanying commentaries children's very direct and engaged interactions with their local environment are well illustrated and their micro-geographies revealed. Attention was drawn to favoured spots, such as 'a gap in the hedge looking at the field' of significance to one girl as this was the spot where she could see through the hedge and into a field where horses were kept. These illustrate the richness that photographic material can bring to understandings of children's everyday mobilities, highlighting the significance of aspects that might otherwise be overlooked, unthought-of or trivialised.

Discipline, disorder and play

Children disrupted the orderliness of their routines by reacting and engaging with their surroundings in a spontaneous way, incorporating play opportunities into their journeys, or taking their own routes, short cuts, that often circumvented adult routes and as such were less open to surveillance. The photographs and commentaries gave an insight into this process revealing children's own routes such as the 'passage way' through the houses and the route well worn 'through the playing field'. The potential for impromptu play responding to features along the route was apparent, one girl picking out 'the woods' as 'good for playing hide and seek', another pointing out 'the park I go to before I go to school'. Such free-play can only occur when children are able to set their own agenda, making decisions along the way, setting the pace, observing, interacting and reacting as they travel.

Co-ordinating, playing and socialising

Social aspects of school journeys were particularly noticeable in girls' material. The complex arrangements involved in what may only be short journeys, co-ordinating with and meeting friends along the way or stopping off at friend's homes were highlighted, revealing even short journeys to be strategic in conveying inclusion in the peer networks. Established meeting points, such as the junction of two roads, shown in one photograph, demonstrate that co-ordinations in time and space are key to feelings of belonging for children, particularly girls.

Merits of using self-directed photography

A strength of self directed photography, noted in this study, was that it gave prominence to minute detail, and the mundane aspects of everyday life, recording aspects that might otherwise have been overlooked, providing insights into children's active, emotional and imaginative engagements in their localities. Self-directed photography allowed children to site themselves in their everyday environments, capture their everyday mobilities. It was successful in engaging children in the research and increasing their participation in the process. The inclusion of self-directed photography captured some of the 'nowness', the immediacy of children's experiences.

Methodological and ethical concerns

There are however methodological and ethical dilemmas to consider when utilising such visual material. There are problems inherent in converting images to textual information and there will always be a degree of subjectivity involved and a reduction of the information contained in each image through categorisation. Dialogue with participants is necessary to gain more detailed accounts of the content and meaning of the images from participant's perspective. Maintaining the anonymity of participants and research locations is problematic. In this study, children included themselves, their friends and family, other people and a variety of places in their localities in the visual material produced. The photographs provide a strong visual narrative of children's local geographies; however they also permits individuals and places to be identified. Permission was granted from participants for the photographs to be used in the presentation of findings, and those images selected for presentation were chosen with care, often reflecting my own concern with maintaining anonymity, rather than children's views on images of themselves, their localities and their practices being revealed.

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