

Reflections on working with a cross national team

Workshop on Comparative Biographical Research TCRU 24/25 November

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1. I am discussing two projects that involved cross national research teams, with members in common. The first is an ethnography using multiple, largely qualitative methods (core team Tuula Gordon, Janet Holland, Elina Lahelma); the second a longitudinal study of youth transitions (core team: Sheila Henderson, Janet Holland, Sheena McGrellis, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson), again using a number of largely qualitative methods, chief of which is biographical interviews. I will touch upon many of the issues with which we are concerned in the workshop. For example, doing research with cross national teams, including working collectively, issues of language and translation; methods of working comparatively, including data collection, analysis and writing up; and theoretical issues.

2. The cross cultural ethnography.

(a) The ethnography took place in schools in London and Helsinki. A general title covering both locations would be 'The formation of citizenship, subjectivity and difference in secondary schools: A comparative school based ethnography'.

By a comparative approach we mean that we compare and contrast processes in Britain and Finland; by a cross-cultural approach we refer to our interest in what constitutes 'a school', and in particular how space and embodiment are implicated there. Basing our analysis on schooling in two countries and four schools enables us to extract theoretical and analytical insights that are not completely context bound. (Gordon et al 2005a: 114).

The comparative cross cultural aspect also included contextualisation in the broader social/political/economic context.

(b) *We draw for our theoretical and conceptual position on a range of theoretical perspectives, including social constructionist, cultural, materialist, poststructural and feminist theories, and our work is a contribution to the extensive tradition of ethnography in the sociology of education. (Gordon et al 2000: 3)*

(c) We generated our data in the ethnography through observation, participant observation, and formal and informal interviews, and collected metaphors for school, feelings about spaces in the school, and associations to a series of words connected with the school experience. We also collected other material from the schools in relation to organisation, ethos, practice, and curricula. Material to help us compare more generally state approaches to education was also sought.

(d) In writing up, our problem was writing across time and space; thank goodness for email. But interaction with each other, reflection on and talking through our ideas, concepts and practices was a critical part of the process. Our method was to meet up at conferences in various parts of Europe, including Finland and the UK. Our papers were projected articles or chapters of the book. We work in English which is lucky for me, but does involve extra difficulty and effort on each side. As the native English speaker, I had a lot of editing to do, preserving the meanings of my colleagues, whilst rendering the English into dulcet prose

3. The transitions study

(a) Now called the Inventing Adulthoods Study, this accidental qualitative longitudinal study consists of three projects consecutively funded by the ESRC on various programmes etc. Our sample was drawn from five sites in the UK differing in socio-economic characteristics. Again using multiple methods, over the course of the entire study we used questionnaires, focus groups, individual

interviews, moving in the second study to a more dedicated biographical approach, using repeat interviews. We also used memory books and lifelines. The young people aged from 11-18 to 20-27.

(b) Our Finnish colleagues on the Ethnography study decided to undertake a parallel study on Youth Transitions, using their original sample from the ethnography, picking the young people up at ages 18, 20 and 22.

(c) In a similar process to the ethnography, we met up to discuss the elements in the parallel studies, the methods and topics that we wanted to pursue. Tuula and Elina were interested in nationality, so we planned to include similar questions on this topic in interviews in each country. We discussed the concepts and theoretical stances we were or were interested in using, which led to sharing some but not all. We came to see the studies as cross cultural and parallel rather than comparative, in that they clearly differed in some ways, indeed in ways related to sample, methods and design. They are similar in that each is longitudinal, and has a considerable history and background for the participants arising from earlier studies, and share similar methods.

(d) We draw on our two studies to make comparisons between the two countries, often focusing on gender in specific analyses. To produce something together, an idea, question or an interest is expressed. We then discuss which concepts we will employ, as indicated in the question, and go on to interrogate our own data on the topic. We share findings and interpretations, decide together what the story is to be, and proceed to collectively write the relevant paper (Gordon et al 2005b). We share out sections to write, and edit and co-ordinate the sections. Email, and sometimes fortuitous meetings in some country or another facilitates the process, in a process itself similar to that employed on the ethnography.

4. Concluding comments

(a) The importance of personal relationships in facilitating collaboration over time and in enabling the level of communication necessary to make the cultural translations involved.

(b) Theory can be a point of contact between projects rather than research design or standardised methods. Writing together and apart is a crucial part of the research process in this instance.

(c) In this instance we moved from comparison in the ethnography to a cross cultural conversation in the transitions study. The two countries (Finland and the UK) provide different social conditions and policy agendas, and this as well as the practical problems of comparing like with like can encourage a less literal take on comparative studies.

(d) Intergenerationality plays a part in this process of collaboration. The collaboration takes place over time, and people change, careers develop in different ways, new generations are brought in and trained. Working cross culturally adds another dimension, and can include exchange in working practices and ethos, as well as of academic content.

References

Gordon, T., Holland, J., Lahelma, E. (2000) *Making spaces: Citizenship and difference in schools*, Houndmills: Macmillan

Gordon, T., Holland, J., Lahelma, E. and Tolonen, T. (2005a) Gazing with intent: Ethnographic practice in classrooms, *Qualitative Research*, 5 (1): 113-131

Gordon, T., Holland, J., Lahelma, E. and Thomson, R. (2005b) Imagining gendered adulthood: Anxiety, ambivalence, avoidance and anticipation, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12 (1): 83-103

Interlocking Research Biographies

Projects/collaborations Interlocking personnel	1980s	1990s	2000s
JH/TG PhD Institute of Education	1980-85		
Girls and Occupational Choice GAOC SB/LC/TG/JH	1983-87		
TG to Finland EL to UK, discuss with JH	1987 1992		
Women, risk and AIDS project (WRAP/MRAP) JH/CR/SFS/SS/RT/TR	1988-	-1992	
UseWRAP/MRAP data for new project on Sexual Identities JH/TR/PR/SFS/JW			2007-2010??
Ethnography in schools Helsinki: TG/EL/PH/TM/TP/TT London: JH/NV/KP		1994- 1994-	-2000 -2000
Protective factors in adolescent smoking JH/SMG/SA		1994-96	
Natural History of the Family JH/VH/MM		1994-95	
Youth Values Inventing Adulthoods (biographical interviews) Youth Transitions SH/JH/SMG/SFS/RT		1996-1999 1999-	-2002 2002-2006
Tracing Transitions: Follow-up study of post-16 students TG/EL			2000
Qualitative Longitudinal Feasibility study JH/RT/SH			2005
Making the Long View: Archiving, Representing and Sharing a Qualitative Longitudinal Resource SH/JH/RT/JC/DH			2005-06
Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group JH/SH/SMG/SFS/RT and many more			2002-2006
The making of modern motherhoods RT/MJK/LH/SFS			2005-2007

Sean Arnold Shane Blackman Jorge Camarcho Lynne Chisholm Tuula Gordon Lucy Hadfield Sheila Henderson Valerie Hey Debbie Holder Janet Holland Pirkko Hynninen Mary Jane Kehily Elina Lahelma Melanie Mauthner Sheena McGrellis Tuija Metso Tarja Palmu Kay Parkinson Caroline Ramazanoglu Paula Reavey Tracey Reynolds Tim Rhodes Tarja Tolonen Sue Scott Sue Sharpe Rachel Thomson Nicole Vitellone Jeffrey Weeks