

Book review

Qualitative Research

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SUE HEATH and CHARLIE WALKER (eds), *Innovations in Youth Research*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 281 pp. ISBN 9780230278493 £55.00 [\[AQ: 1\]](#)

The analysis of young people's life conditions is continuously under debate in social sciences. This book joins such debate drawing special attention to qualitative methods of research in youth studies. As young people's characteristics become more diversified and fragmented, methodological research designs are modifying their applications in order to gain a better understanding of how the category of 'youth' should be defined and interpreted.

Information and communication technologies, new social networks, and personal relations and interactions in a globalized world as well as new forms of consumption, social entertainment, and circumstance routines at a local level make young people's lives more variable and substantially different than previous decades. In this framework, as the two editors (Sue Heath, from the University of Manchester, and Charlie Walker, from the University of Southampton) outline since the very beginning of the introduction, an increasing demand of new research questions, new sources of data, and new areas of inquiry are addressing recent youth studies through new imaginative and creative approaches. If sociology, anthropology, and ethnology want to follow the rapid changes recorded by young people, innovation seems to be their inevitable destiny, from both theoretical and methodological points of view.

The accounts in this book focus on new instances of research practices. There are three main aspects of this innovation that can be used when conducting qualitative research projects on youth: (1) The pragmatic fulfillment of social research through a wide range of methodological alternatives that can be adapted to a large scale of topics; (2) a participatory frame of research where young people are (partially) allowed to control research outputs during the processes of collecting data, doing analysis and making dissemination of the main results; and (3) a reflexive dynamic of reciprocity between the researcher and the participants in the fieldwork.

The 15 papers collected for this edition are mainly built on the collaboration of young fellows and postdoctoral scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and different British universities. Each dissertation testifies a concrete application of these three aspects of youth study with several explanations concerning their implications in the research process.

New techniques are currently replacing or complementing focus groups and face-to-face interviews with the task of collecting more detailed information about young people's habits, attitudes, and aspirations. Following this same analytical strategy, authors present an extensive variety of methodological options available for youth research using nontraditional techniques, such as music and graphic elicitation, mental mapping, blog analysis, visual and arts-based methods, as well as mobile ones. These methods are becoming increasingly popular among youth researchers, with a large curiosity and increasing consensus among social scientists about the opportunities of their adoption for in-depth analysis.

Each paper show interesting examples of how it is possible to reach young people on an intimate basis, and how to improve their active participation in the fieldwork. According to this perspective, the evolution of qualitative methods aims to investigate how the youth frame and understand different experiences in daily life and localities. Young people can assume the roles of 'proper researchers' (or 'coresearchers') depending on how and how much facilitators allow them to be involved in the meaningful process of outcomes production (i.e. formulating questions) and interpretation (i.e. contributing with accurate and relevant insights). Doing so, young people's agency is placed on the research design in order to let them directly provide a rich and up-to-date dissertation about their own interests, preferences, choices, behaviors, self-development practices, and future plans.

This prospect suggests many advantages and disadvantages that should be taken into account when proposing this type of research. Data authenticity and representativeness can be achieved only if young people feel comfortable during the specification and explanation of their narratives. Flexible methods intend to facilitate more 'youth friendly' research techniques and research situations where every participant is able to offer his/her experience as spontaneously as possible.

The social researcher should adapt the analysis to the different styles, times, and expressive forms of young people to enhance the quality of data collection and interpretation. For this reason, new methodological approaches are focusing not only on participants' written, oral, and visual skills but also on the incorporation of self-directed drawings, commentaries, and video or photo diaries as dense collections of life accounts.

This heterogeneity of techniques provides useful ways of making young people involved in and committed to the research but, at the same time, it also supposes important ethical concerns. The management of mixed research methods implies specific dilemmas in fieldwork and write-up related to the feasibility of data with the research objectives and to the respect of young people's privacy and of their role as peer researches. These issues are stressed in most of the chapters of this book, with particular attention to content production of online and virtual channels, through weblogs, videos, or mobile methods of narration.

Most of the authors offer valuable recommendations for practitioners pursuing research sensitivity in the application of these methods and in dealing with any distress they can produce due to the overlap of public and private spheres. Mainly, this sensitivity, as well as effective practices for protecting personal intimacy, is described as

synthesizing the biographical materials into one significant picture for each individual case while maintaining active consultation with the participant.

Evidently, in the framework of this qualitative and participatory youth study, personal relations established in the research field represent another aspect to be considered with special attention. The researcher and the young participants continuously negotiate to form a communal integrity of social and emotional reciprocity. This dialogue facilitates mutual confidence and allows the pursuit of a direct enrichment of life experiences as personal accounts and empirical data.

In these terms, the research, as a whole, becomes a reflexive experience providing patterns of emancipation—personally and professionally—for all the actors involved in it. From the side of the participants, every young person has the opportunity to express himself or herself, make decisions, and think deeply about his or her identity, personality, vocations, and formal or informal relationships. From the side of the social researcher—and more specifically, of the ethnographer—the set of relational trust and reputation with the participant is crucial for establishing and maintaining credibility during the research process.

Limitations and challenges of different methodological strategies rise important questions in this research field. However, it is important to value very positively the efforts of all the authors who, at the beginning of their careers, contribute to this interesting compilation, not only for being the pioneers in the application of new techniques in youth studies but also for showing us the way to gain legitimacy and scientific relevance from a reflexive approach to these topics and from the concrete management of these tools.

Some suggestions on how to create a more suitable strategy for organizing and understanding young people's experiences could be useful. Preferably, a more specific category for youth can be applied depending upon the existing differences between age cohorts related to the 'youth category'. This suggestion takes into account the fact that participatory methods and reflexive processes provide different outcomes if the research is focused on children, teenagers, young people, or, alternatively, young adults. Furthermore, the age cohort of research participants should be methodologically and theoretically considered and inserted within the wider axiological, cultural, and social contexts in which the fieldwork is carried out.

A longitudinal application of this methodological pluralism and qualitative design is another prospect that can allow researchers to check and to follow up changes in youth lifestyles from an intergenerational perspective or from a biographical view. Depending on research goals and case studies, there should be more emphasis on other significant aspects such as race, gender, and social backgrounds. This range of variables is just a little sample of all the elements that can shed light on the structural complexity of youth for a more accurate interpretation.

Finally, imaginative approaches to researching young people's lives such as those included in this collection should look for practical synergies with more traditional research approaches in a quantitative paradigm (i.e. questionnaires or surveys) and with an explicit commitment to social and institutional practice. Qualitative approaches in social sciences supply a deep knowledge of reality that can be reflected in the formulation

of unique insights, suggestions, and guidelines for the civil society and, more specifically, for educators and policy makers.

The core idea behind methodological pluralism and new flexible methods is that knowledge accumulated from a variety of sources and in a variety of ways is not only interesting and useful but also necessary. This book contributes to setting the basis for methodological innovation in different areas of youth study with a great potential for future projects that cannot be ignored by contemporary social scientists working in these topics worldwide. The suggestions offered would lead imaginative and creative techniques collected in this book to be broader and more well-established in academic and nonacademic spheres.

Alessandro Gentile
Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain