Gendering the Looking Glass? A traveller’s tale from Kidworld
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Abstract
This work is part of a doctoral research project into the cultural and social influences which impinge on the career and education decisions made by young people as they reach the age of 14. The choices they make at this stage have a huge impact on future trajectories, but they lack the relevant information to make the best choices. They are also in an ambivalent position in that they are expected to conform to the choices provided ‘for their own benefit’ by the system, yet they are also expected to think for themselves. This paper discusses the need for an approach to researching with young people which mirrors the approach seen in some feminist literature – lessons learned there can be applied in situations such as these – and in so doing we can hope to better articulate the career advice needed at this stage.

Introduction
The Research Questions have evolved as the intentions of the research have developed. The motivation for this project first emerged from an interest in the way in which GCSE provision was organised at the school in which I taught during the 1990s. I had observed how the range of courses could be severely limited for various reasons – for example in a Modern Foreign Languages course, the choice of language might depend on which year of a two-year cycle was starting at the time (some schools being unable to offer more than one language at a time). The school had operated a system whereby children in the lower-ability classes were obliged to undertake a GNVQ Science course as an alternative to the traditional versions of GCSE Combined or Single Science taken by their more successful colleagues. It was clear at the same time that the esteem in which these courses were held by parents was very different, and that some parents made representations to the school if they felt their children were being made to embark on what they saw as an inferior course. These parents often successfully lobbied to have their children moved onto the alternative syllabus, even if that involved a greater risk of lowering their child’s final grades at age 16. My first intentions for this research had been to investigate these outside factors and their influences on the decision-making process faced by all pupils at the age of 14, when they decide on a range of GCSE subjects. As discussed above, this process, often referred to as ‘year 9 Options’, has in recent years undergone a significant change, with a number of alternative schemes designed to widen the range of different trajectories. However, all of these factors mentioned here appeared to diminish the involvement in the action of decision making for the children, and so it became important to me to investigate what they themselves thought about all this.
Therefore the research questions are now phrased in terms which seek their voice:

1. How do individual pupils understand the process of career decision-making, and what meaning and values do they assign to particular career paths?

2. How do ‘social class’, ‘gender’ and ‘ethnicity’ underpin the pupil’s decision making process, and to what extent are pupils able to understand and articulate this underpinning?

3. What are pupils’ perceptions of the institutional influence upon their academic and career progression?

This was a shift in focus away from identifying cultural and social influences imposed on the children by the adults involved, and attempting to answer these questions now poses interesting methodological and ethical questions. The ethical questions will be discussed in a separate section.

There are good reasons for treating this work as a phenomenology, since I am concerned with the particular situation of the individuals themselves. All young people in this situation will react differently, and I am not seeking to generalise behaviour in an attempt to extrapolate applicable meaning. My aim is to get to the voices of the children so that I can understand how they understand and interpret the social and cultural pressures on them. Their motivations cannot be assumed to be the same as an adult’s as their experiences of such pressures are at this stage ill-formed.

In order to describe accurately the attitudes and beliefs of the participants, it is necessary to adopt a methodology which facilitates this, and drawing parallels with feminist work is helpful here.

Feminist methodology grew out of a reaction to a tradition of research which regarded those being researched as subjects to be observed and described. Feminists began to argue that a great deal of sociological research involved men observing and interpreting a world designed and fashioned for the benefit of men and for the oppression of women. Therefore a movement began which suggested that traditional approaches to research with women should no longer be considered, and argued to replace them with a far less interpretive, and far more participatory, approach. Thus research with women has developed over the years between these two extremes. For example, Walby (1988) describes four different approaches to the study of women in the political arena:

- neglect (either by ignoring women altogether or by dismissing them as insignificant)
- criticism (of approaches which have treated women as irrelevant and which have ignored the exclusion of women from voting for example)
- addition (treating women’s involvement in politics as exceptional)
- integration (women included into the central questions)

It seems reasonable to argue that the last stage described here, that of involvement of the participants in the direction of the research, is the only supportable one.

Research with children follows a similar pattern, and it is only recently that researchers have started to argue for greater involvement for children involved in research. Indeed, Oakley (1994) describes this process as evolutionary, and suggests that childhood studies have reached the second stage. In the intervening years, we have seen much progress to stage 3, in which children are now able to express a voice, but this is in general in addition to, and not part of, the adult world. And there are emerging examples of research which seek to integrate children fully into the process of research, seeking and validating their views by reference to the children themselves.

“Kidworld”

Since this research is concerned with pupils’ own perceptions of the social and cultural influences on their attitudes and decisions, it is necessary for me to enter “Kidworld” as Bill Bryson calls it in his 2007 autobiography. Kidworld is not the same as the adult world – different rules and perspectives apply, so that situations which may seem clear and obvious to an adult can be confusing and difficult to a young person who lacks experience in a range of situations. In Kidworld, children are expected to conform to the adult world and to abide by decisions made in the adult world without being a part of the decision making process. This is evident in a number of ways, particularly in the school context as children and young people are expected to follow a rigid system of rules set up by the adults in charge of the school. In studying Kidworld, a methodology is required which acknowledges this structure and attempts to interpret from the children’s perspective. There are parallels to be drawn here with a feminist standpoint, and emerging from this I will argue that by studying feminist methodology I will be able to develop a methodology along similar lines which can be applied in this case. It is not of course as simple as taking and using a feminist standpoint – Ramazanoglu (1992) dismisses assumptions on which traditional western scholarship are based as inherently sexist and racist, and separates feminist methodology as distinct, instead of recognising common ground. However I intend to work in the opposite direction looking for common ground in methodology which has been developed for feminist research, so I will compare and contrast aspects of feminist and child-centred research, drawing from Oakley’s (1994) discussion. There are also comments to be made on the interpretation of research data which are particularly relevant in a study involving children.

There are some parallels (and some significant differences) between the status of women and children in society – both occupy a position in the idealised family group; the place of work is the home (housework and school homework); both are traditionally ‘protected’ by society ‘for their own good’. Where dysfunction
occurs, this is seen as a problem to be dealt with (unwanted pregnancy, bullying, drugs, etc) and thus children have become regarded as problematic per se. “There are … so many categories of children who pose problems that we are forced to conclude that it is children themselves who are seen as the problem”. (Oakley, 1994:25)

Studies of these issues have been generally buried within in the family as the unit of study, and indeed a body of statistical evidence exists for the children in this study concerning their social background (for example school meal status, postcode). To what extent would it serve the children to seek their perspectives on these issues from within a framework to which they are subservient? I therefore need to determine the personal circumstances of the children from the children themselves, and not from statistics and opinions gathered from the adult world. The position of women and children as oppressed minorities has been much discussed, and herein lies the first and most significant difference between the study of women and the study of childhood: women’s studies emerged from a political movement, and have been carried out by women with women. While the rhetoric of equal rights is now being seen on behalf of children, it is that very phrase which illustrates the difference: “on behalf of children”. Children’s voices are now being heard, but as yet this is at the behest, and under the interpretation of, people within the adult community.

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Smith (1988:107) says that [Feminist sociology] … is a method that ‘creates the space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday world. This is not to say that we can substitute the word ‘children’ for ‘women’ however. Before I continue, I will mention a few significant differences suggested by Oakley (1994) between studies involving children and studies involving women:
The first one is that everyone has experienced childhood; it is not the case that everyone has experienced womanhood.

Secondly, and very importantly, the background and history of women’s studies is grounded in a political struggle by women. This is not the case for children – virtually all of the work is undertaken by adults on behalf of children, though some work is now carried out accompanied by children. Progress is still at the behest of adults however.

Finally there is the question of ownership – children are still largely shepherded through the education system, given ‘decisions’ to make and options to choose which are largely determined by the adults who ‘own’ them at the point of decision (be they parents, care workers, teachers, or medical staff). While these decisions often do have to be made on their behalf on the grounds that children’s knowledge of the system is incomplete, there needs to be a recognition that children are able to make significant decisions for themselves. Since this project is located in the Widening Participation agenda, the aim must be to enable young people to have sufficient accurate information to see for themselves that the pursuit of Higher Education can lead to financial and social rewards that they might at this stage be unable to envisage.

There must therefore be lessons to be learned from feminist research if I am to develop a methodology appropriate for this study. Since the major objective of my research is in hearing and interpreting the participants’ voices, and since feminist research is largely concerned with a similar search for authentic voice, this is a good point to start.

**What is a feminist methodology?**

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) discuss distinctive features of methodology, but it is noticeable that their discussion centres more around what feminist methodology is not, and they point out that there is no particular technique, no ontological or epistemological standpoint that is distinctly feminist.

However they do argue (p 15) that “feminist methodology is distinctive in how it locates the researcher in the research process”, and that it is “a requirement of feminist research to reflect critically on the place of the researcher in the process of knowledge production.” They do add at this point that these features would also appear as good practice in other situations.

So it seems that there is no methodology which can be distinctively described as a feminist methodology. However it may be possible to develop a methodology which contains no contradictions to feminist methodology. So for example a methodology which does not seek to authenticate the voice of the participants is unlikely to be described as a feminist methodology. This might be done by reporting dialogue verbatim from participants, but this can prove problematic:
Smith (1988) describes a project investigating women’s involvement in a particular work organisation – in this case mothers who worked at supporting their children’s schooling. Traditional research methodology would have treated the women in the study as objects for observation, therefore it was necessary to develop a methodology which sought to express the women’s experiences without reinterpreting them from the researcher’s viewpoint. This would involve in-depth interviews with the group of women in the first instance, and was evident in the data from interviews which were reported verbatim rather than coded into subtexts determined by the researcher.

The research team also interviewed staff at the school to enable fuller understanding of some of the terminology used by the subjects and to place it into context. In the context of that work organization and integral to it are practices of impersonal evaluation documenting the child’s relative status in the class, in the school, and in some instances relative to an anonymous population defining standards for a grade level and so forth. It is necessary to carry out this work to set an accurate background for the comments made by the pupils, but not to provide data with which to categorise those comments.

It is clear that the distinctive features of Smith’s (1988) work – the expression of women’s experience in their own words, the representation of a politically sensitive standpoint and the rejection of existing truths – can be recognised in the work of Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) described above.

However in this case since young people can be quite reticent about giving opinions seeking respondent validation from them will be more practical. Thus the interpretations for example from shared language can be referred back to a sample of the participants, effectively to ask them ‘is this what you meant to say?’

In particular therefore, this methodology will be characterised by

1. The interpretation of experiences expressed by the children, making use of my interpretation of shared language (and shared knowledge of the institution), and referring these comments back to a sample;

2. An analysis of the power relationships inherent within both the organisational structure which surrounds the children and within the system through which they must negotiate for their options;

3. The use of other available data (for example attainment data) to provide background information which might explain and illuminate the children’s perceptions.

There are complex issues around the way children are positioned in the educational world, both from the children’s and the teachers’ point of view. Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007) describe work which suggests that working class boys regards schools as a feminized space; that teachers tend to apply gendered approaches
to children according to their age (for example younger boys are treated as feminine; compliant behaviour exhibited by girls is taken as a sign of maturity; compliant behaviour by boys sometimes as a mark of immaturity because ‘silly’ behaviour is taken as an indication that they are challenging the system).

This work has to be done in recognition that it is not part of the children’s efforts to emancipate themselves from a position of disadvantage by reason of their being children. This research has been developed and conducted by adults in the adult world for purposes which are not connected to any concerns the children have expressed about their situation in society, and therefore is not politically motivated from their point of view.

**Ethical considerations**

The methodology described above necessitated a different approach to the ethics of the situation. While there are procedures to be followed in seeking access to the participants in the research, there is groundwork to be done in any project before the participants can begin to take part. This can cause complications – I describe below how one particular research project was affected by the way in which the participants were initially approached.

The traditional approach for a study of this kind would be to approach the guardians of the children concerned, and to seek permission of access. In this context, the guardians are the family (through the parents or legal guardians of the children) and also the school (through the senior management team and the board of governors). As well as an ethical consideration, this is also a legal one, and permission was sought through these channels to approach the children. In practice, this involved acting through an intermediary, one of the senior members of staff, to negotiate access to an appropriate cohort of children. ‘Appropriate’ in this case included the age group and ability range of the pupils. But a more important and overriding permission of access was then sought from the children themselves, with an explanation that they had been chosen for this research because of their age group, and because they faced interesting choices in their near future concerning education and career.

At this point the issue of informed consent becomes problematic. The children consented willingly to be interviewed, and accepted my assurances of anonymity and confidence – in other words they would not be personally identified by anything I wrote about them, and nothing they said would be reported within the school. They were also assured that they should feel under no obligation to answer any question they felt uncomfortable about. It is very easy to make assurances like this, but can be very difficult to know whether they are understood and whether they have been effectively carried out. How do I know for example that they weren’t inhibited from refusing to answer questions by the nature of the situation? In the event, one of the subjects did refuse a question about his absent father – this issue was not pursued, and I took it to indicate that the subjects had indeed taken the assurances seriously. From my point of view, having willing volunteers is
fundamental to the success of the project, and no matter how strong the permission might be from ‘official’ sources, without the proper consent of the children, it could not have proceeded.

But still the issue of informed consent is problematic, because although I explained as well as I could the nature of the questions we would be exploring, the possible publishing of outcomes, they could not become aware of the full extent of what has been written about them, because they do not have access (both physical and intellectual) to the arguments between these pages. However, this does not invalidate the project providing I can take an opportunity to report back to them upon conclusion of the project the significant findings so that they can see the possible effects that a project like this can have if recommendations are made and implemented.

David et al (2001), in conducting research into parental involvement in education, wanted to investigate purely from the pupils’ point of view without involving the parents. They felt that children of that age (one of their groups consisted of year 9 pupils) were competent to decide whether or not to participate and went about providing them with sufficient information and guidance for them to be able to make their decision. However, this presented them with almost insurmountable obstacles to complete objectivity. In order to gain access to the children, it was first necessary to negotiate with various members of the school hierarchy, from governors and headteachers, to classroom teachers. They began their contact with the children with whole-class discussions to inform them about the nature and purpose of the research, but on reflection found that the context of these discussions were very much in an educational format rather than a research one: the children were effectively ‘made’ to listen, since that is the expected behaviour in the classroom setting; since this classroom process is referred to in the research, then to some extend the children were already taking part in the research at this point – data collection was taking place before their consent was given. I do not believe that this represents an ethical problem – access had been granted by the school, and the data was gathered with the knowledge of, and in the presence of, the class teacher.

The children were given leaflets which were designed to make them accessible, but this in itself drew questions about the interpretations of the illustrations used – while the illustrations were (appropriately in my view) used to make the leaflets attractive and readable, they could also be open to alternative interpretations based around normative expectations of pupil attitudes and behaviour. After the classroom discussion, pupils were invited to take part in either individual or group discussions, and many chose to do so.

In light of the above research, I chose a different approach to participant selection. As above, I approached the senior management of the school, and negotiated access to groups of pupils through their science class. The classroom teacher then spoke to the class and invited them to take part in a piece of research. At this point the class was aware that the research was about their option choices, but no more than that. Groups of three at a time were then assembled in the interview room in the presence of a member of the
support staff (a technician well-known to the children) who would act as chaperone. Once each group was assembled I would describe and explain the purpose of the research to the group and invite their questions and participation. Only once this participation was consented (as in every case it was) did I begin recording. By inviting them into my interview room, I was presenting them with my persona as a researcher rather than as an educationalist. But as David et al (2001) found, it is impossible to remove all attributes of the teacher-pupil relationship. Every consideration has connotations – for example my choice of dress (shirt and tie) would identify me with the teaching staff rather than with whatever conception the children were expecting for a researcher. However this approach avoided one of the pitfalls mentioned by David et al (2001) in which they found that the whole-class discussion involved the researchers talking while the pupils listened obediently. In the event, the discussions proceeded with the active consent of the participants – active in the sense that they were able to opt out at any time (and one of them did indeed to refuse to answer a sensitive question about his home background).

**Observations**

Preliminary results suggest that the participants in this research felt more than able to take part, and indeed, welcome the opportunity to offer their own interpretation of their situation. However, it is also clear from extracts of our conversations that some of their perceptions are either ill-formed or naïve. Statements like the ones below have been used in the past to support the notion that children are unable to form reliable opinions about issues, and unable to take meaningful decisions.

For example when they were considering possible future careers:

“I like to be a hairdresser as a back up, but if I can get the grades I’ll be a vet”

*Natalie*

“My English grades were worse than I expected this year and I wanted to be a journalist. Now I might try medicine”

*Becky*

Or when they were considering the future:

“I’m worried about how I’ll cope as an adult – I can’t see myself being able to live in a flat without my parents”

*Gemma*

“They [women applying for jobs] were treated as inferior in the past but now they’re getting more women into business they tend to take women over men”

*Heather*
This is not surprising when they are speculating about situations beyond their experience, and often they combine this with an idealistic view of the world, for example when discussing issues of gender and race and the effect they have on the jobs market, they are convinced both of the desirability and existence of equality.

All the young people in this survey had thought about their futures in some way. Most felt that the age of 13 is too early to think about their careers, but all were giving careful thought to the direction of their future education and expected it to continue beyond the age of 18. Where they had an idea of what they would like to do for a career, this was invariably based on some experience they had shared with a member of the wider family network – sometimes an elder sibling, but more often a cousin or friend of the family. They had seen this person in the career, and could picture themselves on the same path. It was also clear that they were willing and able to articulate where they needed help and were learning ways of getting this help.

“I’ve been asking a relative [who works in admin] about getting on at University. I reckon I can handle it.”

Liam

“Sometimes you have to go and look for help cos your parents might not know enough”

Becky

“if you want to do something with loads of role models, [like football] it’s easy but if you want to be an archaeologist you’d research it wouldn’t you?”

Mike

These statements demonstrate that the young people in the survey are well aware that they are lacking important information, but also that they know what this is and where they can get it.

It is not clear however what schools should do about this shortage of information reaching children before the age of 13. McCrone et al (2005: 30), in a literature review of studies concerning pupil choices, report evidence that

the timing of careers advice is very important to the success of such interventions, and that, significantly, interventions were most effective when made some time in advance of when young people have to make subject choices.

It is clear then that schools need to provide advice and guidance from a much earlier date than year 9, and that this guidance will have to be carefully given, because young people take more heed of advice which seems credible to them. One way of achieving this is by inviting exemplars from a variety of careers and professions to talk to the pupils, though Gemma warns:
“…so you’d have to bring like loads and loads of people that do all different things, and I’d only be interested in a couple.”  

Gemma

The advice they need is therefore difficult to give – every young person in the survey had a different way of interpreting the signals they have been receiving. But what is clear is that the advice they receive should be based on their view of the world, not the view assumed upon them by the adult world.

References


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