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What is This?

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'Thanks for the memory': memory books as a methodological resource in biographical research

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ABSTRACT The article describes the evolution of the 'memory book', an innovative method for biographical research. In the first part of the article, we explain the origins of the method, tracing our own journey from conducting memory work as a research group to the creation of memory books as a method to be used alongside interviews in a longitudinal qualitative study of young people's transitions to adulthood. In the second part of the article, we map the form and content of memory books generated in the study, commenting on issues of audience and privacy. In the final part of the article, we discuss how we used the memory book data, distinguishing between their function as sources of documentation, resources for elaboration and critical tools for the understanding of identity. The article draws attention to the potential for the method to bring embodiment and the visual dimensions into a method dominated by text and discourse, as well as facilitating the expression of a range of 'voices' and time frames which complicate cohesive narrative presentations of self.

KEYWORDS: *biography, diaries, ethics, memory work, visual data, young people*

I was thinking today about the word memory. This is a memory book right? So I guess I should record my memories so, 'of my day I remember. . .' But it's not, is it? I mean kind of, but I think I'm going to change the way I use this book. I already have a diary, I have a dream book, which is where I write down my dreams, and think about what they mean. So I'm going to use this literally as my 'memory book'. I can have a beautiful memory of someone or something, or I can have a memory of something bad which I don't want to think about. I'll still write what I feel about it. (Entry in memory book, young woman.)

A longitudinal, qualitative study

We have been following the young woman quoted through her transition to adulthood since 1997, and this is a quote from her memory book, one of the methodological devices we used in an attempt to place the young people at the core of the construction of their own identity and 'project of self' (Giddens, 1991).

The study is a longitudinal, qualitative study[1] following a sample of young people drawn from five different sites in the UK: an inner city site; an affluent area in a commuter town; a deprived housing estate in the north-west; an isolated rural village and contrasting communities within a Northern Irish city (Thomson and Holland, 2003). Across the three component studies, the major focus for investigation has shifted from values to adulthood to social capital, but our concern has always been to investigate: agency and the 'reflexive project of self'; values and the construction of adult identity; how the social and material environment in which young people grow up acts to shape the values and identities that they adopt; and the impact of globalization on the individual.

In the first study, we used questionnaires given to 1800 young people across the five sites, followed by focus groups (56) and individual interviews (54) with volunteers from the questionnaire sample. In the second, we moved into a more dedicated biographical approach to how young people constructed their expected or desired adulthoods. We selected 120 young people across the sites in the first study, and employed a range of methods over a period of two and a half years to investigate their understandings of and strategies for transitions towards adulthood. These included repeat biographical interviews, memory books and lifelines, and it is the memory book that we discuss in this article. The third component study continues the biographical interviews, and we have just completed a fourth round of interviews with the young people. The young people were between 11 and 18 years at the start and are currently 17–24.

Origins: from memory work to memory books

The idea of using a memory book grew from a number of sources. We were interested in documenting young people's changing constructions of self over time, and were aware of the limitations of relying exclusively on the interview method. We began the study working with Anthony Giddens' theoretical model of the reflexive project of the self, in which a biography is reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life (Plumridge and Thomson, 2003: 214). Yet we were aware of the need to ground what is primarily a symbolic theoretical account of identity (McNay, 2000) as well as providing spaces for less coherent expressions of self. We wanted both to document young people's unfolding

biographies, but also to find ways of explicating the resources that they draw on in this identity work. Drawing on Foucault's later work, we have imagined these resources in terms of 'technologies of the self', historically and culturally specific practices through which the 'individual acts upon himself' [sic] (Martin et al., 1988: 19). Although it is possible to access these technologies empirically through the narratives that young people construct within interview situations, we also wanted to explore the potential for a more embodied and visual methodology that young people could engage with outside the interview setting.

We knew of the potential of using alternative strategies to disrupt a purely narrative presentation of self, such as the use of photographic albums in oral history and cultural studies (Seabrook, 1991; Walkerdine, 1991); and the use of photographs in autobiographical work with young people (Cohen, 1989; Towers, 1986). We were particularly interested in methods that had been employed in child therapy in which young people were encouraged to compile memory boxes in order to create a resource for the maintenance of a coherent sense of self in the face of parental bereavement, adoption and fostering (Barnardos, 1992; Harper, 1996; Jones, 1985). We hoped that young people would bring to their memory books material they saw as relevant to their current and future identities, and records of their experiences in whatever form they saw as appropriate. In this sense, memory books would be receptacles for memorabilia, materials that did not simply document a young person's life (in the way that a journal or diary might) but which reflected the resources that they drew on in order to imagine themselves.

The notion of a 'memory' book was also influenced by our longstanding interest in the theory and practice of memory work, a method developed by the German feminist and scholar, Frigga Haug (1987), and elaborated by psychologists June Crawford and colleagues (Crawford et al., 1992). The method is integral to Haug's theory of how people become selves and the part they play themselves in that construction. The initial data of the method are written memories that are reappraised collectively to uncover and document how they are produced. The initial memory texts differ from narrative accounts and case histories because they describe what was subjectively significant in this memory produced through engagement with the past. It is expected that what is remembered is remembered because it is perhaps problematic, unfamiliar or in need of review (Crawford et al., 1992). The episodes are remembered because they remain significant and the engagement with the past in the present represents a continuing search for intelligibility. As Crawford et al. point out, memory work is:

> . . . a method par excellence for exploring the process of the construction of the self and understanding the ways in which emotions, motives, actions, choices, moral judgements, play their part in that construction. It gives insight into the way people appropriate the social world and in so doing transform themselves and it. (Crawford et al., 1992: 41)

In the first study of youth values, as a research team we undertook memory work ourselves, both as a means of facilitating the work of the team, and to develop a critical awareness of our own investment in the arena of the research – childhood. We wanted to be aware of both our adult and child selves and their relation to the area of study, and to locate, both socially and historically, the accounts we produced in response to trigger words relevant to the study. We thought that, by evoking our own memories of being the age of those we were researching, we would develop some insight into processes of social change and continuity, as well as facilitating a child-centred approach in the research.

Having worked as a memory work group over a period of time, we introduced a new element not suggested in the original method: collecting together our various written memories and analysing them in order to explore the kinds of identities that were implicit within them. To our surprise (and in some cases horror), we found that the identities implicit in these memories were often at odds with the kinds of identities that we would have presented more self-consciously in a narrative of self. For example, where we might have felt comfortable presenting a narrative identity of an agentic rebel, the memory work material reflected a more passive and victimized self. This alerted us to the way that the practice demanded by the memory work method (of describing a detailed situation in relatively contemporaneous terms) facilitated the expression of a 'different voice' compared with approaches based on the solicitation of retrospective biographical narratives. We drew on memory work in a range of ways in the Youth Values study (Thomson et al., 2003a). In the memory books we hoped that asking young people to document themselves through the collection of *memorable* material, away from the demands of the direct interview situation (more or less in privacy, engaging in a different mode of time) might facilitate the production of different and complementary expressions/constructions of self.

Developing the method: experiments and pilots

Our plan was to use the memory books as a basis for the second of three interviews, nine months to a year apart. The first stage in developing the method involved attempting to create our own memory books. This helped us to gain a realistic expectation of what young people might produce, to think through how the second round interview might best capture these 'projects' and to gain insight into the ethical issues involved. Working with a blank notebook, each member of the research team attempted to document their everyday life and sense of self over a three-month period. We then met up to share and compare the results. We found that we had approached the task very differently. One of our team had created an elaborate and artistic 'self book' organized around themes using pictures, writing and graphics. Another had kept a daily diary. Others had a pile of the paraphernalia of everyday life

collected together but disorganized. We also found the task of sharing our books highly exposing, experiencing feelings of guilt (at having 'failed' at the task'), envy (that ours was not as 'good' as others') and embarrassment (the revelation of something intimate). This experience alerted us to the advantages and disadvantages of the method. We recognized that young people may approach the task very differently (if at all) and had to decide whether we wanted to allow for such diversity. We also realized that some young people would be intimidated by the task and particularly by the blank pages of the book, encouraging us to explore ways of introducing more structure for those who wished it. We realized that questions of ownership and confidentiality would be very important for those who decided to create memory books.

At the same time as experimenting with the method ourselves, we consulted the young people about the proposed method by post. As a result of our experiments and deliberations, we produced a small book that could be used as a diary or scrapbook, with some stickers that could provide headings for the entries. These headings included 'adult', 'change', 'problems', 'sex', 'myself', 'relationships', 'love', 'career' and many more. The young people could use them or not as they wished. We provided young people with folders (for the collection of paraphernalia), glue and disposable cameras. The package included a leaflet that explained what we expected from the memory books, commenting on issues of ownership and confidentiality and reflecting on our own experience of keeping them. On the latter:

> We found that each one of us had a different style – from neat and artistic to – well, let's just say a pile of stuff in a heap! But it wasn't too much trouble and was a great thing to look back on (even just a few months later).

We handed over the memory book package at the end of the first interview, and asked the young people to keep it in any way that they wished and bring it back for the second interview. We explained that the books belonged to them, but that we would like to copy extracts with their permission. These are the instructions we gave:

> In your book you could do any combination of the following:
>
> - Write
> - Draw
> - Stick in photos
> - Stick in magazine or newspaper cuttings
> - Stick in things that remind you of something – tickets from events you have been to, postcards etc.
>
> You will see that we've included a set of stickers with 'trigger' words to get you started – and some blank stickers to write any other suggestions of your own.
>
> You can change your style whenever the mood takes you. The most important thing is that whatever you put in is about you and your life: for instance your

plans; your friends; your hopes and fears as well as the more day-to-day things you do.

It is good to put things in when they are fresh in your mind, but you can always add things later. Some of you may want to add something to the book every couple of days, others may use it every week, month . . . or whenever suits you. Try to remember to date your entries – it makes it a lot more interesting when you look back.

Having distributed the raw materials, we then wondered if anyone would in fact create a memory book, but with hope continued to explore how to use them in the interview context. We piloted the memory book interview with one of our sample, Carol, who was given an early prototype, and notes on how the interview session went were fed back to the other interviewers. Some key points from the feedback recorded in field notes at the time are as follows:

Carol had a memory book and photos with her. This was something different to manage in the interview. After an initial flick through we went on to talk about education in the last year and then when talking about US used the memory book. This worked well – C talked through her book and told the stories to elaborate on the events and people that were mentioned in her book. I asked a few questions, reflected back as she went through, but generally let her tell the tale. . . . This session was friendly. . . . It was a nice insight into her life – family and friends. Formals, parties, Halloween party – all gave a flavour of what her life is and who and what is important. Had a very good sense of C at end of session. (Field notes, Sheena, October 1999)

We were delighted and somewhat surprised that 49 young people (out of a possible 98) brought their memory books to the second interview. A few had completed memory books but decided that they were too personal and they would keep them for themselves. Most of those who brought the memory books along let us copy extracts. The length of the books ranged from three to 50 pages. Over half the young people in the study had not produced memory books. Reasons given for this included that the book had become too private, it was too risky to write things down where others could find it, it was not their style to write things down, they had lost the book, or forgotten to bring it along. Loss and forgetfulness themselves may have other underlying meanings, including a desire for privacy and confidentiality reflecting young people's resistance to researchers' attempts to see into their intimate worlds. As one of the interviewers observed in her field notes:

Confidentiality has only been an obvious issue to date for one person, who directly stated that she did not want ANY of her book to be seen, let alone copied by us. However, some of the 'forgotten' and 'losts' may be connected to this issue. (Field notes, Sheila, June 2000)

Subsequent discussions also revealed how uncomfortable many young people felt expressing or exposing themselves through writing. For others

there was a feeling that nothing happened in their life that was worth writing about ('I never had nothing to put in it ever. I don't do anything. It was boring'), or so much happening that they had no time to do it. As one young man explained:

> I don't know if it was my dyslexia, I couldn't write it, I felt they are going to see this diary, if they're going to see my handwriting and everything you know there's no way they're going to be phoning me up asking what does this say. (Owen)

When the interviewer suggested using pictures instead, he replied:

> I couldn't really get into it at all you know the idea. I tried them little stickers and things and writing a couple of sentences well literally a couple of words and I just couldn't get into it . . . . It weren't part of me, I just couldn't do it. (Owen)

Several talked about how difficult it was to write and commented on being unfamiliar with the diary format; yet despite these difficulties they battled on and created some highly personal and articulate accounts of their lives. Martin's memory book, for example, is a blow-by-blow and amusingly written account of a club 18–30s holiday in Tenerife with his mates and his first few days at university. 'It's certainly different because I haven't done any diary or any thing like that before, I suppose it's a little bit difficult remembering to write things down. . .'

Another young woman adopted a diary style incorporating photos of family and boyfriend; she explained:

> In a way I found it a bit difficult to actually express myself writing but um I can't really do a tape because there is always someone in my house and I can't really get much privacy to do it. (Belinda)

Although they complied with the task, some young people found the method constraining. Joss observed 'I don't really like diaries. It just lets you go back and relive your failures. Usually you write about failure', and Valerie commented of her daily diary 'it's like writing what you already know so it seems pointless'.

It has been important for us throughout not just to regard the young people as participants in the research, but to see it as participatory research. Memory books were an important tool in the project of sharing the research process. As such we were flexible and responsive to what young people felt able to contribute. If a memory book was produced, we used it in the interview as a basis for a subject-led dialogue, or as a stimulus for particular aspects of the discussion. But if no memory book was produced, we did have an agenda to pursue in the interview. However, we were also highly conscious of power imbalances between the researcher and the researched, not least because of our own experiences of exposure when our memory books were seen by

others. We certainly did not feel that it was appropriate to make too many demands or strictures on how young people completed the book, and were aware that we needed to be careful about how we used the material shared with us.

The first stage of analysis: mapping the style and content of memory books

It was not always realistic for researchers to copy entire memory books, and a proforma checklist was created in which we noted down the basic elements of style and content of the books, whether copies had been made and how they reflected the character of the overall material. Original memory books were then returned to the young people themselves. These checklists provided us with information enabling us to create an initial mapping of the form and content of the books.

Diary and scrapbook were the major forms of take-up of the memory books. The young people often used the stickers provided to structure their entries, and sometimes added themes of their own using the blank stickers. The scrapbook form was also popular and a range of material was included: for example, printouts of emails, valentine cards, love letters and postcards (including from the research team)[2], a personal testimony (of a religious conversion), a family tree, autographs, train tickets, exam results, club flyers, stickers, tickets for cultural events, party invites, newspaper cuttings, artwork, poems, song lyrics, entries by friends, lists (of friends, favourites, etc.), pub mats, brochures and a hair extension. These would be stuck into the book or organized under themes, or sometimes temporally. Many memory books combined elements of both the diary and scrapbook style. Ten young people produced memory books with only writing, and only three with no writing. In addition, many young people included photographs of friends, family and the spaces they inhabit. They also wrote about what was happening to them; their thoughts and feelings, and 'critical moments' formed the basis for many of the entries in the books (Thomson et al., 2002). More younger than older members of the sample and more young women than men completed the books (37:12). More of the young women than of the young men favoured the 'Dear Diary' approach.

In some cases the memory books took on a life of their own, and the young people reported that they found the experience of keeping the book enjoyable. They said that it did encourage them to reflect on changes over time, and it was good to look back and to see how their thoughts and feelings had changed. One saw it as a continuous assessment of her life, and some used it as an alternative for someone in whom to confide. Some comments were:

> Yeah, 'cos I've never actually write a diary and I feel like now I'm writing down my feelings and what's happened and how I'm changing and things, its quite good 'cos you see how you were and you see how you're progressing. (Helena)

> I actually like it, I started keeping my diary after I started this because when I'm lonely and that or got nobody around I just read through my diary and just remember all the events and just have a good giggle to myself. (Mal)

> It kind of gets you thinking about how you do actually realize the world and things in it and that. (Fay)

Karin described having to do something exciting to put in the book:

> Well for the first two weeks that I did it I thought what could I put in it I thought I hadn't got nothing to put in it, so I said 'oh well I've got to do something exciting to put in it'. . . . So we went to Alton Towers so we put all our stuff in there, all our tickets and leaflets an that. (Karin)

Paula said that she had never written a diary before but had produced a very detailed memory book diary showing off her beautiful handwriting. She had enjoyed writing it, it seemed to fill a gap when she went to college:

> In the course I don't really get too much writing so this like can say anything. (Paula)

Sherleen enjoys looking back:

> It just helps me really think about things. (Sherleen)

The field notes below, describing one young woman's response, capture the feeling of many of the comments made:

> R said she enjoyed keeping the diary very much, she liked being able to look back at what she had done, what she was thinking, and how she was feeling at different times. She didn't like to keep the memory book out in the open in her bedroom for fear any one else would read it, so when it wasn't in view she sometimes forgot about it. . . . Her general evaluation of being involved in the project was very positive. She found that she thought more about what she was doing, keeping the diary helped her work through things in her head and she enjoyed meeting up and having the chance to talk over things. She valued the opportunity to reflect (not her term). She said that after the meetings she would go home and think about what she had talked about and what was happening. (Field notes, Sheena, February 2002)

For some, keeping the memory book became extremely important, and they planned to continue the process; one felt so strongly that he had made a provision in his will for it to be given to a close friend in the event of his death.

Audience/privacy

In attempting to make sense of the memory books, it is important to consider the audience that young people may have expected or intended for them. This is as relevant for those who produced a memory book as those who did not.

Imagined audiences may be multiple and fluid, changing over time, and this is clearly demonstrated by those who created a memory book but decided not to share it with researchers. Notions of privacy are also complex and mean something different for young people than for adults in that they have few spaces that they control (Henderson et al., 2003). For young people in particular, the expression or creation of intimacy may not be coterminous with either the 'private', privacy or confidentiality (Thomson, 2003).

Several of those who completed diaries noted that, although they kept them hidden from their family, they were happy for the researchers to read them (Cheryl, Mal, Valerie, Beth). For others, their memory book was more public and they showed it to their siblings or parents, friends and boy/girlfriend. In a few cases (3), it seemed that memory books were a collective project shared between friends, and a group of girls in one site (and school) spoke to the interviewer about how their memory books compared. Memory books could also become a tool for young people, and Monica explained to us that she used hers as a way of communicating with her boyfriend. She gave him the book to read because it explained how she felt about things that had happened in their relationship about which she found it difficult to talk to him.

Memory books varied then in terms of their tone and the audience for whom they appeared to be written. Some of the young people explained that they already kept a personal diary in which they recorded their most personal thoughts, and so their memory books were more public. For others the books seemed to be quite personal, written as 'a conversation with oneself', although offered up to the researchers' gaze. Memory books also differed in how explicitly they referred to the research team as an audience. At one extreme, 'Dear Diary' entries were made directly to a named researcher and, at the other, memory books took the style of a secret and private space all, or much, of which was not shown to the researcher. Most commonly books slipped between styles. One young woman's memory book, for example, opens with a photograph and a formal introduction of herself, and includes musings on what is expected of her in the research. A few entries later she reveals that her parents have just split up and from this point her book moves into a much more informal style in which she expresses her day-to-day anxieties about what is happening in her life. As the style changes, so the entries become less formal, with increasingly messy handwriting. Yet we are reminded of the researcher's gaze by a note at the bottom of one page (in a different coloured pen suggesting that the author has annotated the text) apologizing for the quality of the handwriting.

For those who produced a memory book, perhaps we can say that they are not private documents. But we have to ask whether any document is. As Kehily et al. (2002) have suggested, private diaries themselves have always been understood as 'conceits', written to an imaginary audience underpinned by the possibility of exposure. But questions of privacy and confidentiality do not end with the production of a text – exposure can be negotiated. Young

people were able to claim confidentiality in the way that they presented memory book material within the interview context. Some edited as they talked through them, skimming over pages, and not mentioning some of the material that was written or displayed there. In most cases, however, the young people were happy to have their books looked at and copied, and few made any provisions about areas of content that they wanted to be kept confidential:

> Hardly anyone was bothered about my taking and copying some of their memory book. I assured confidentiality, asked what they didn't want copied, and sent all borrowed books back promptly (or gave them back on my next visit). Only one girl told me not to copy something about the boy she had fancied, it seemed because she was embarrassed about it. I did wonder whether taking books away and copying bits would be likely to affect what was put in them in the future – although we had talked about my borrowing and copying bits at the first interview – at that time they had not written anything in that this related to. (Field notes, Sue, May 2000)

It was the researchers who sometimes had a problem with confidentiality. We were aware that young people had entrusted us with their memory books without the benefit of our understanding of the audiences involved in academic production. This then gave us a troubling sense of responsibility, as observed in one of Sheena's field notes:

> I did not realise we wanted examples from all diaries. So I didn't ask R for a copy of her diary, or to copy different pieces, neither did I ask her how she would feel about me doing so. This is probably my own projection, but I have to say that it did feel that it would be a bit of an intrusion to do so.
>
> [Sheena did plan to talk to R and find out what she could copy later.]. . .
>
> On the basis of this pilot I feel very comfortable about the use of the memory book as a tool for directing the interview and getting at small, but key, life details that may otherwise have been lost in a general catch up interview. My only reservation is the business of copying the material. It just feels that the material is very personal to them. As I said above it could be wholly my own agenda, as I am very sensitive to respecting other people's privacy (which comes from, I suppose, protecting my own!!). (Field notes, Sheena, February 2000)

Understandably, young people were most concerned about confidentiality in relation to the known audiences of their social worlds, yet the styles that they adopted suggest an awareness of a wider public as well as being cultural references to particular social locations. For example, one young man used his memory book as a vehicle for his own creative writing, producing what the researcher called an 'Adrian Mole' account of some 50 pages that was witty and journalistic. This and a number of other books showed the marks of deliberation and editing, and contrast with a more informal and raw 'confessional style'. This raises interesting questions about the relationship

between literary styles and the (production of) authenticity. Clearly some styles suggest a more mediated and crafted approach than others. However, we must assume that all the material produced for memory books is crafted. What then becomes interesting is the exploration of the particular styles that young people adopted and how these might relate to the wider cultural resources and textual styles to which they have access.

Using the memory book data

We have mapped the main characteristics of the memory books, in terms of style, content and audience. In this section we will discuss in more detail how we have used the memory books as data within our wider project of understanding how young people 'invent' their emergent adult identities and the technologies of self through which this work takes place.

In a discussion of the use of diaries, biographical objects and visual data as 'documents of life', Plummer (2001) distinguishes the role that such data may play in terms of *documentation*, acting as *resources* for further explanation and as a *critical* tool for understanding identity. We have found these three terms useful as a means of reflecting on the different ways that we have drawn on the memory books in our work.

DOCUMENTATION

The life story interviews that we conducted inevitably led to a high level of glossing in young people's accounts of the period of their lives between interviews – usually between nine months and a year. Recent events and preoccupations tended to dominate the accounts, and our interview agenda encouraged young people to focus on key moments of change and transition rather than the everyday activities and feelings that make up the fabric of life. Memory books could provide a powerful document of the more mundane aspects of teenage life, drawing us into a more immediate time frame of contemporaneous events. This was particularly so where young people had approached the task of keeping the books on a regular basis. Thus we gained insights into the temporal intricacies of friendships, romances, nights out, moments of boredom and insecurity that might otherwise have eluded us.

Even where young people kept their memory books more sporadically, they might gloss over the period since they had last written, but then engage in detailed discussions of activities such as a recent holiday, the millennium, waiting for GCSE results and other events that would have received only cursory attention in an interview. In one memory book we were transported into the here and now of a PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) class, with a page given up to a conversation between girlfriends conducted surreptitiously beneath the teacher's nose – data similar to the secret notes that formed part of Hey's ethnography of girls' friendships (Hey, 1997).

Things were recorded in memory books that were not mentioned in

interviews, which may have been the result of time constraints. For example, when putting together a case study of one young man over a period of four interviews, the analyst found that, despite providing detailed accounts of romantic and sexual relationships, he had never been asked about his first sexual experience. We found that this information was in his memory book, where a photograph of a hotel was accompanied by the handwritten text 'the place where I lost my virginity'. In many cases we observed that young people expressed 'a different voice' in their memory books, reflecting aspects of their character that were not evident in their interviews. For example, seemingly quiet, shy and serious young people sometimes presented us with highly comic portraits of self. Others created memory books in which otherwise hidden emotional depth and reflexivity were displayed. In this respect the books did fulfil the hopes that we invested in them in the light of our own experiences of memory work. However, we do not wish to suggest that the voices that are captured in the memory books are more authentic than those expressed in interviews, rather that the medium enriches and complicates the picture that we are able to build of the young person concerned.

The inclusion of biographical objects was an important aspect of some (but not all) of the memory books. These objects included photographs (both those that young people had taken themselves and those they had cut out from magazines or postcards and elsewhere), but also material objects: ticket stubs from leisure events and journeys, a pom pom from the night of the millennium, records of examination scores and other items. In an important way, such objects can be understood as 'documentation' or proof of the stories that they accompanied. In many cases these documents signified things that young people were proud of, echoing the records of achievement that they compile as part of GCSE course work. Other documents, such as the email printouts included in several young people's memory books, not only reflect the changing character of communications (replacing the postcards of a previous generation) but also can be seen as evidence of young people's access to, and proficiency with, ICT. The inclusion of other people in memory books through direct and indirect messages suggests that they might have a need to authenticate or display friendships and romances.

Most of the young people entered the study in 1996, when they were aged between 11 and 19. The inclusion of visual data in memory books provides an important document of their changing embodiment over the course of the study during which time they have undergone dramatic physical transformations. Yet these transformations leave only minor traces within the data, observed and commented on in researchers' field notes, and discussed in passing in interview discussions of personal change. Where young people included photographs in their memory books, they provide an enduring record of bodies at particular moments. School photographs, pictures of them in newly acquired braces, a hair extension and photos of new tattoos and piercings all bring the body into the foreground within a methodology other-

wise dominated by text and discourse. Likewise, the use of visual imagery in the form of pasted-in pictures and drawings all provide a sense of the visual cultures within which young people construct their identities – with references to the layout and style of young women's magazines, as well as the more masculine motifs.

RESOURCE FOR FURTHER EXPLANATION

As we have said, one of our aims in developing the memory book method was to create a resource to facilitate the second interview, enabling an approach that was less driven by our research agenda and more by the young person. In this way we hoped that the memory books would serve to de-centre the interview process, bringing aspects of the young person's experience outside the room into the research encounter. The use of a 'prop' as a means of eliciting discussion within interviews has been used by other researchers, including Spence and Holland (1991) who used family photograph albums (see also Plummer, 2001: 64–5 for a discussion). The memory books certainly changed the character of the interviews of which they were part, both in terms of the dynamics of the research encounter and the type of data that was generated. The two extracts from field notes from the pilot interviews give a taste of the impact that memory books had on the researchers involved:

> Initially when L came in with her memory book and photos I was a bit thrown. She immediately placed them all on the table and said something like 'here they are' in a way that suggested that she felt like she had done her homework – fulfilled her obligation to the project, that the purpose of our meeting was just to look at the memory book [...] I suppose that I should not have been all that surprised that she had the MB with her – the info. I sent her in the letter accompanying the memory book, and the info sheet itself, outlined the method as just that – fill in the memory book, and bring it to the interview. After the initial reaction, I enjoyed the session with the memory book. It felt like we got onto a different level of intimacy – but still fairly boundaried and safe. The method felt like the kind of thing you might do with a close friend – show them bits of your life, share holiday snaps, and info. on people in the snaps. Time – it took much longer than the other interviews, and could have gone on longer. Much easier to go off on tangents – lots of pieces and snippets are thrown up. It's very tempting to pursue all, but it would be impossible. (Memory book pilot, Sheena, October 1999)

> When R sat down she placed the MB on the table. It was the key prompt and begged immediate attention. In this sense it was perfectly natural to use the MB as the key feature of the interview. Because of the style of her MB – a personal daily journal – I found myself edging back a bit, I didn't feel comfortable to zoom in and read everything that she had written. We sat side on to each other and the diary was off centre towards R. I gave her the space to flick through and read out and expand as she went. I followed up on different things that she brought up from the diary, or as a date or word would appear, e.g. 12th July/exams, used that to find out more and get her on another track. (Memory book interview, Sheena, February 2000)

Researchers clearly struggled to find ways of engaging with the memory book material, knowing that it would be impossible to discuss every photo, and that (depending on how the young person had compiled the book) it might be inappropriate to ask people to read out the entries. In practice researchers developed a flexible approach, inviting young people to talk them through their memory books and moving between a discussion of the books and the interview schedule.

From the transcripts it is difficult to get a feel for whether the memory book gave the research subject more control or not. The length of memory book and non-memory book interviews is not notably different – an average of 1230.3 text units as opposed to 1118.8 text units. The memory book part of the interview varied from a few lines to half the interview. The format of memory book interviews tended to be that a segment of the interview, usually the first, was spent examining the memory book. For most this involved both the interviewer and/or the young person using cues from the memory books (including the stickers as trigger) for a much fuller description of events, feelings, critical moments and the like. There tended to be less of a narrative flow to the memory book interviews than the non-memory book interviews, and topics raised in memory books were sometimes repeated in other parts of the interview. When looking at photos and drawings in the memory books, less of the transcript was codable. It tended to look like this:

> He goes to the Forum. I'll talk to you about all these later [LAUGH]. Right this is us at the forum formal, Ian and Suzanne went because they were going as the school representatives, so I had to take a photo of them and they're my two friends. And then this is all the lads, this is all Jamie's friends and they're two other friends. (Alice, second interview)

Given that the researchers had no time before the interview to read the books and to absorb their contents, the extent to which the material within the books influenced the interview itself depended in part on the willingness of the young person to refer to the memory books during the interview, and the extent to which the researcher was able to weave between the memory book material and the interview schedule. Where young people presented highly visual material with clear thematic headings and use of stickers, this might be easier than where the books were dominated by text.

A critical tool for understanding identity

It was only after the second interview was complete that researchers were in a position to read the memory books and to copy sections of them for record. At this point the books became available to the whole research team and were subject to the initial mapping analysis, described in the first part of the article, in which we explored questions of style, audience and content across the memory book sample. Subsequently memory book material became inte-

grated into the collection of data for that individual young person, and could be drawn on as an additional data source for the development of case studies. Although it was interesting to see the range of ways in which young people approached the task of compiling the memory book and the range of cultural forms that they drew on in this process, it was when we considered this material in relation to individual projects of self that the material came into its own.

It is only at this rather late stage of the project's life that we are beginning to develop in-depth individual case studies, which draw on the full body of data generated by and with individual young people. Where young people have completed memory books, these have been extremely valuable, providing fascinating insights into the cultural resources and technologies that underpin their projects of self, as well as enabling us to compare the interpretations of researchers with the constructs of self that the young people themselves produce. The mediation of identity work through cultural resources is extremely apparent within the memory books, where, for example, a classed and gendered identity may be claimed through the adoption of a particular literary style, or a mimetic relationship between self and other may be mediated through visual images literally cut and pasted from popular culture (Lury, 1998; Willis, 1990). We do not have space here to provide examples of these extended individual case studies, although they are providing the foundation for the analysis of the longitudinal dimension of the data set. Here we are able to explore the relationship between the way in which an individual's project of self unfolds over time, drawing on specific cultural and social resources, situated within particular social horizons (Thomson, 2004). Rather than simply understanding the memory books and the images within them as a document of the self, we could also see the books themselves as a technology – both the means and the medium for inventing the self (Lury, 1998; Plummer, 2001).

Conclusion

In this article we have described the evolution of an innovative method of the memory book, demonstrating our own journey from conducting memory work as a research group to the creation of memory books as a method to be used alongside biographical interviews. We have placed ourselves clearly within this account, recording our experiments on ourselves as well as our own reactions to the ways that the memory books disrupted our own expectations of interview encounters. We have described how young people responded to the challenge of creating their own memory books, and we have mapped some of the elements of the form and content of the books that they allowed us to see. In explaining how we have come to use the memory book data, we have distinguished between their function as sources of documentation, resources for elaboration and as critical tools for the understanding of

identity. We hope to have shown the importance of memory book data as a means to bring embodiment and the visual into a method dominated by text and a theoretical frame dominated by narrative. We also hope to have shown how memory books facilitate the introduction of a range of different voices which disrupt cohesive narrative presentations and theorizations of self. These voices are diverse, but tend to be embedded within a more contemporaneous time frame than interview narratives. While they appear to be less 'public' accounts of self than those produced in interviews, they are far from simply 'private' and we have suggested that an exploration of audience and literary/visual style can be productively pursued as a way of understanding the cultural resources on which young people draw in the process of inventing themselves.

It has taken us as researchers a while to be able to understand how we can use the material in the memory books, and we have been particularly exercised by their material presence, and how to convey what they are and what is in them to others. How can we ensure confidentiality if we show copies of the pages when so many present a complex and revealing brew of personal experience and feelings? The memory books have proved to be a rich and provocative resource, which as researchers we feel privileged to access. We are being very careful about how we use them, intending to ensure that we respect young people's privacy and generosity. In much the same way as private letters and diaries, memory books are compelling, providing access into an extremely intimate space that has the danger of inciting voyeurism and a prurient fascination. It is then a continuing challenge to us to use the memory book data in an ethical way that honours the trust that young people placed in us by both creating them in the first place, and then sharing them with us.

Memory books are not simply records of daily life but are self-conscious repositories of memorabilia. In our view there is potential for the use of memory books with a range of different research subjects, with a view to gaining insight into periods of personal change. We are currently exploring the potential for using them with expectant and new first-time mothers, seeking to capture some of the intense identity work that takes place during this period as well as exploring the powerful role of the visual and consumption in the forging of contemporary motherhood (Thomson and Kehily, 2004). On the basis of our experience, we are aware that the period during which memory books are compiled needs to be relatively short, and that ideally the method should resonate with existing cultural practices such as keeping diaries, portfolios, baby books, etc.

NOTES

1. The three studies were: (1) Youth Values: A study of identity, diversity and social change, funded by the ESRC as part of the *Children 5–16 programme: Growing up in the 21st century* (L129251020) (McGrellis et al., 2000); (2) Inventing Adulthoods: Young people's strategies for transition, also funded by the ESRC on their research programme *Youth Citizenship and Social Change* (L134251008) (Thomson et al.,2003b); and (3) Youth Transitions, funded as part of the *Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group* at London South Bank University (Edwards et al., 2003; Holland et al., 2003). The research team included Sue Sharpe, Sheena McGrellis and Sheila Henderson.
2. Researchers sent various types of postcards to the young people as part of keeping in touch. Holiday postcards were also included in the memory books.

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