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Researching Young People's Orientations to the Future: The Methodological Challenges of Using Arts Practice

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Abstract
Visual and arts-based methods are now widely used in the social sciences. In youth research they are considered to promote engagement and empowerment. This article contributes to debate on the challenges of using arts-based methods in research with young people. We discuss the experience of a multidisciplinary project investigating how young people imagine their futures – *Imagine Sheppey* - to critically consider the use of arts-based methods and the kinds of data produced through these practices. We make two sets of arguments. First, that the challenges of participation and collaboration are not overcome by using apparently 'youth-friendly' research tools. Second, that the nature of data produced through arts-based methods can leave researchers with significant problems of interpretation. We highlight these issues in relation to the focus of this project on researching the future.

Keywords: Young people, imagined futures, arts-based methods, participatory strategies, ethics in visual research, empowerment.

Do you think about the future?
'…[these are] things you start thinking about when someone puts them in your head'
(Focus group participant, FG1)

'I'd like to see the future so I could change it'
(Focus group participant, FG2)

Introduction

The future eludes us, in everyday life and as researchers. We cannot access or contain it, know it or control it. Yet our orientations to the future matter a great deal for how we inhabit the present; how we make connections between the now and the not-yet through wishing, hoping, planning and so on. As Mische, following Schutz, puts it: 'human action is constructed within an imaginative horizon of multiple plans and possibilities', and she calls for greater attention to the ways in which images of the future inform social practices in the present (Mische, 2009: 696).

For young people on the brink of adult lives, the question of the future and its role in the present is especially salient. As the above quotations from participants in the *Imagine Sheppey Project* suggest, young people apprehend the future in different ways, and it is these different orientations that are at the heart of this enquiry. However, accessing young people's processes of sense-making and taken-for-granted habitual stances towards times of their lives they have not yet lived is no simple task. Whilst some do speak clearly about hopes, dreams and fears, for others the future remains unthought. To conduct a study of the future we need to develop a

research process and practice that can lead to the revelation and stimulation of future orientations in verbal and non-verbal forms. Taking inspiration from the 'turn towards time' (McLeod and Thomson, 2009) and moves within the social sciences and humanities to explore the social world through multi-sensory means (Hurdley and Hicks, 2011; Pink, 2011), we worked with artists using creative methods to enlarge the scope for understanding research participants' sense of the world and of themselves, past, present and future.

In practice this was challenging as well as animating. In the following sections, we provide a brief review of the literature on doing creative research with young people, then introduce the *Imagine Sheppey* project and the methodology on which this article is based. The rest of the article is divided into two main sections. Under Participation, Collaboration and Research Relationships, we critically consider the participation and expression of young people in this project and the ways in which creative methods might support the democratisation of fieldwork. In addition, we consider the impact of multi-disciplinary collaboration for knowledge creation of young people's lives, and the new ethical challenges of doing participatory visual and performative work with young people. In Researching the Future, we critically present the modes in which we did fieldwork for this project - arts-based workshops including improvised performances and collage-making, and image elicitation in focus groups. We discuss the challenges of this in practice and the potential applicability of these methods to other topics of enquiry. We conclude with some reflections on the potentials and limits of arts practice both as a means of unpacking future orientations and of working with young people more generally.

Arts-based research with young people

The use of visual and arts-based methods in the social sciences is currently popular allowing researchers to develop data collection strategies that go beyond text as well as responding to technological advances and new media practices (Pink, 2006). On the one hand, arts-based methods help researchers get closer to participants' thoughts, emotions, and experience in innovative ways. They allow a focus on the process of knowledge production and facilitate expression outside of language (Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2008). On the other hand, theatre, dance, collage, film, or photography become new means of presenting and disseminating research results especially to non-academic audiences (Douglas and Carless, 2013; Lapum et al, 2012). Research with young people in particular has taken up arts-inspired methodologies (Clark and Moss, 2001; Rose, 2006; Thomson, 2008) for two main reasons: engagement and empowerment, which we critically discuss in the following sections.

'It is easier to engage young people through creative methods'

Young people are perceived to be more responsive to visual-based research and the use of new media than text-based research methods. Buckingham (2009) draws on Gauntlett and Kitzinger to argue that the playful nature of these methods appeals to younger participants and puts them at ease with the researcher and within the research field (adults, in contrast, might be dismissive of the same 'childish' methods). Yet, Buckingham also notes that this assumption neglects the extent to which the encounter with visual and arts-based methods in formal education might affect the willingness of young people to participate in research projects using similar tools. Young people are aware of their 'abilities' from school assessments as

expressed in the ways they portray themselves as 'artistic' or 'not artistic'. The 'not artistic' may then be less inclined to participate in 'creative' research. Further adolescents and young adults trying to establish themselves as beyond childhood might feel uncomfortable even dismissive about engaging with perceived children's activities.

'Creative methods empower young people and democratise fieldwork'

Arts-based methods are frequently used in participatory contexts to empower young people by facilitating their proactive engagement in the research, shaping the process at different levels. In terms of techniques, asking young people to keep a video-diary for instance has the potential to explore and account for areas of their daily experience that might be more difficult to capture through words during formal interviews (Latham, 2003; Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). Yet, capturing everyday practices or representing familiar spaces in photographs and video does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of young people's lives. Rather, visual representations are, as much as written accounts, a way to tell a story, which is only one of the many that could be told (Pink, 2001). Instead, what becomes crucial is to investigate the social contexts that led to the formulation of a visual representation as it is offered to the viewer/ researcher.

Participatory arts-based methods may facilitate negotiations within fieldwork and the establishment of more equal relationships between researchers (academic and non-academic) and participants. However, it is important to recognise how the operation of power in fieldwork also depends on the social, economic, and cultural backgrounds and dynamics of the participants and researchers. For instance, Allan (2012) conducted research in an elite English school asking her participants to make video diaries for discussion in interviews. On more than one occasion, young people were dismissive of her comments because they thought she did not know how to handle a camera, which significantly altered the researched-researcher power relationship. Allan's participants were extremely self-confident young people empowered by their cultural, social, and economic capitals more than by 'creative' participatory methods.

In addition, the researcher and the participants are differentially bound to the fieldwork and, whereas the (academic) researcher will usually only temporarily inhabit certain social, economic and political spaces (that of the participants), those participating in the research will not benefit from the same type of freedom. As such, the relationships created during fieldwork and among different co-participants will also depend on their different levels of dependence and proximity to the issues under investigation.

Imagine Sheppey: project description and methodology

The issues of engagement, empowerment and democratisation discussed above informed the development of the research presented here. *Imagine Sheppey* explores how young adults (16 to 21) on the brink of adulthood imagine their lives taking shape. This question emerged out of earlier research, the *Living and Working on Sheppey* (2009-11), in which we collected essays written by school leavers imagining what their futures would hold in terms of work and family life (Crow and Lyon, 2011; Lyon and Crow, 2012; Lyon, Morgan and Crow, 2012), as a direct comparison to similar essays gathered by Ray Pahl on the Isle of Sheppey in the late 1970s (Pahl, 1978). We greatly valued the content of the essays but were frustrated

by some of the limitations of the technique – the brevity of the essays produced especially in 2010, a reliance on text, and a lack of interaction in the process of future-imagining.

In *Imagine Sheppey*, we therefore sought to engage with young people in ways that might more freely elicit their different orientations to the future. If the overstated claims of agency and empowerment in using creative methods made us wary of adopting them, at the same time we were attracted by their potential especially in relation to our earlier text-based approach, and because of the emphasis in arts practice on working with imagination to produce new ways of knowing.

The *Imagine Sheppey* project started in October 2013 and was funded for one year; data collection, analysis, and arts-based work took place in spring and summer 2014. We worked largely with young people whose lives were not already anticipated through known middle-class trajectories because we were interested to hear directly from them how they were grappling with their imagined futures in a context of limited opportunity and unfavourable public representations. The project took place on the Isle of Sheppey which is situated along the north Kent coast in the Thames Estuary around 50 miles to the east of London, and is joined to the mainland by two bridges (including a railway line). It has an important maritime and industrial history with, until 1960, a significant Royal Naval Dockyard at Sheerness, now a commercial port. The island has struggled in times of recession (in the 1980s and in the 2000s) and currently has a higher than average adult unemployment (2.2% long-term unemployed cf 1.3% in the South East) especially youth unemployment (1.6% long-term unemployed cf 0.9% in the South East), and lower than average educational attainment (16+ with no formal qualifications, 30.3% cf 19.1% in the South East; highest qualification at level 4 and above, 13.0% cf 29.9% in the South East) (all figures from Census, 2011).

Ahead of recruiting the young people, the project team was made up of sociologists (the authors of this article), the artists group Tea, and a community partner, the Blue Town Heritage Centre, a community museum and archive. We decided that the form of the project would be a series of one-day artist-led workshops to take place on four Saturdays in May 2014 based on our judgement that asking potential participants for a greater time commitment would deter them. We envisaged the workshops as a space of 'intensive immersion' into creatively thinking about the future.

We arranged a planning meeting to explore the form and location of the workshops which we promoted to different young people's networks and settings. The project team proposed that the workshops explore different spaces for future-imagining including *work*, *leisure*, *public* and *dwelling*. The planning group settled on specific sites: a local factory producing cement statues for gardens for *work*; a local park for *leisure*; a former school for *public*; and the residential street where our partner community museum is located for *dwelling*.

Each workshop had a similar structure combining expressive and reflective activities. Participants were provided with objects, tools and materials – selected by Tea - to transform and inhabit each site in small but significant ways asking: What is going on here? What could go on here in the future? For instance, in the visit to the workspace, the young people placed objects and labels on items in the factory and showroom disrupting the space and their own thinking about it. Later in the day, we asked them to imagine and design a floor plan of their future work place on a shared floor which we then discussed together. We had two camcorders and several digital cameras through which we all recorded the activities of each day and participated in

the social and embodied process of both being in and documenting our activities (Blum-Ross, 2013: 1). Following on from these workshops, we organised a collage-making session for the core participants for further explore their future orientations, and carried out focus groups with a wider cohort of young people (not including the core workshop participants).

In addition to the audio-visual recordings of all the workshops, we wrote extensive notes and reflections on the activities, and transcribed the focus group discussions. Our reports were part of the process of analysis as from one workshop to the next we began to identify significant dimensions and themes (e.g. value, reach, and resources). These informed the content of the final project video and in turn we viewed the audio-visual material to stimulate new directions of analysis.

Participation, collaboration and research relationships

Recruitment and participation

We started recruitment in spring 2014 with the help of teachers working in two educational institutions on Sheppey, contacts facilitated through our community partner. We also started networking with local community and youth centres by creating project spaces on Facebook and Twitter. We created a strong visual identity for *Imagine Sheppey Fast Forward* as we then called it, and distributed stickers, posters and flyers of our activities around the island.

Despite our critical discussion above, the belief that young people are interested in participating in arts-based research is backed up by a number of success stories (Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins, 2009; Larson and Walker, 2006; Wright et al, 2006). However, these projects were largely designed in collaboration with schools and youth centres, often in deprived areas, to create safe spaces of personal development and skills enhancement. Although recruitment is one of the main challenges of working with young people, working in partnership with existing organisations eases this process. For *Imagine Sheppey* we sought a middle ground of working with teachers to facilitate participation but retaining an independent space for experimentation outside of the curriculum. Despite the support of local schools, we struggled to gather a core group of six participants. Among them there were two young people who presented themselves as ‘artistic’, two ambitious students wanting to improve their academic-related records, and two young volunteers at the Blue Town Heritage Centre who found the group activity appealing. In addition we recruited 20 young people to three focus groups. We gave £10 vouchers to the workshop participants as a surprise gift to thank them for their contribution. We offered the focus group participants £10 vouchers as an explicit incentive to participation.

The challenge of securing participation prompts two reflections. First, young people might be more likely to collaborate in research involving the use of visual methods or with media components because these projects engage with means of communication that are closer to the ways young people communicate. Instead, arts-based research may attract only people interested in or practising art with the ‘right’ skills. Second, whilst we advertised our planned activities through existing youth networks on Sheppey, none especially promoted arts-based activities or interests for young people. The majority of organisations we networked with offered skills enhancement programmes, free advice for job seekers and health-related services.

However, in this context our workshops offered new kinds of temporary spaces for young people to explore their lives. Perhaps a lack of familiarity with such

activities and our own positions as outsiders - despite our previous research and good relations with community organisations on the island – did not produce the levels of participation we hoped for. Those who did participate were nevertheless very positive about the experience and this may give them a bridge to future art-based community activities.

Web-based interactions with young people

Prior to and during the workshops, we attempted to reach potential participants by advertising on our Facebook and Twitter pages. Yet to establish web-based interactions with - rather than make announcements to - young people also proved challenging. Although our Facebook page became popular among people living on Sheppey and especially those working with young people, it took some time before our participants started interacting with us, for instance 'liking' or commenting on our project-related posts. Observing the format adopted by other Facebook pages popular on Sheppey, we started posting YouTube clips, photographs, and asking for viewers' opinions on issues addressed by the research process. Even though the posted links were always able to gather few 'likes', the virtual support came from other (older) people on Sheppey. It was only towards the end of the workshop programme that young people started leaving comments on our page and sharing project photographs with their friends – thus making their participation public among their social circles. For example, after the third workshop, one of the participants wrote on our Facebook wall: 'thanks for an awesome day today the project is so worth doing'. This was an unexpectedly emotional statement that made us aware of the way the research touched our participants (Gasman and Anderson-Thompkins, 2003: 433).

Overall then social media became a valuable means for us to communicate with young people, elicit their curiosity, facilitate participatory projects, and disseminate the partial results of ongoing activities. Certainly the young participants needed time to test whether they could trust us (and by extension the project) before making public their support and participation. This suggests to us that monitoring the level of interaction between researchers and participants on social media can also become a resource to give an account of the process of establishing relations of trust in the research process.

Young people and power in fieldwork

As discussed earlier, one of the positive features of participatory arts-based methods is its potential to support the democratisation of the fieldwork. Overall, our project was successful in creating spaces in which young people operated autonomously.

At the beginning of our workshops, we encouraged participants to use all the available media equipment. Instructions were given on how to operate still and video cameras and we also suggested the use of smart phones to take additional photographs. As expected, young people's levels of interaction and participation were strongly determined by how comfortable they felt in a specific situation and this developed over time. For instance, during the last workshop, participants took complete charge. Some of them recorded what we were doing with the available video and still cameras, often interrupting ongoing activities to choreograph different movements, including directing us. This was a long way from some of their earlier uncertainties asking us: 'Is that right?' 'Is this what you want?' On other occasions, the same participants carved out their own space of activity where they could do things at their own pace, according to what they knew, and without being challenged by the group. These moments of withdrawal may be evidence of the difficulties that

participants encountered in establishing a dialogue with us and the other young people in order to negotiate their needs and expectations. However, they also demonstrate the young people's capacity to remove or protect themselves or refuse the available roles and constructions of them (Milne, 2012).

The dynamics of participation and withdrawal are able to shed light on the process of negotiation within the fieldwork. Whilst we encouraged participants to engage in the workshop activities, we did not try to prevent them from doing what they wanted even when their actions distracted the rest of the group or inhibited ongoing performances. The workshops were deliberately loosely designed to stimulate young people's participation in an experimental and exploratory environment where all ideas were taken in consideration equally. This freedom sometimes led to surprising new spells of engagement and interaction. Moments of proactive engagement are clear examples of the relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere that was created. That said, a reflection on the limits of democratisation must account for what research makes possible in relation to what participants wish for and feel able to do. Whereas making a video or taking photographs are generally activities that facilitate young people's engagement, it is also true that the same activities allow only certain roles to be performed – the film director, the film-maker, the performer.

Interdisciplinary working

From the outset of *Imagine Sheppey* we sought to bring together the thinking and practice of performing arts and sociology such that the process of data collection and image-making for a potential video was one and the same. This was an attempt to privilege neither one disciplinary approach nor another in an experimental engagement that could take off from convergences and 'productive irritants' alike (Schneider and Wright, 2010: 5).

In practice this felt both more and less constraining than the more conventional mode of collaboration we had engaged in as part of the *Living and Working on Sheppey* project where the artists responded to the data the sociologists (in collaboration with community partners) had collected. We agreed at the outset of the *Imagine Sheppey* project that one of the outcomes should be a video, which meant that Tea were less free to respond to the space and the encounters of the project than usual, but were able to contribute to the direction and design of the project throughout. As sociologists, we benefitted from our exposure to artist-led practice for rethinking modes of data collection but this also meant giving up control over the type or quality of data they might produce. Whilst we had regular meetings and frequent email communications, we nevertheless encountered the difficulties of genuinely achieving a shared interdisciplinary understanding. Obstacles included the silences that accompanied our own taken for granted assumptions about different aspects of the research process, the different conceptual resources we were used to thinking with were, and the ease of retreating into familiar roles.

However, there were powerful moments of synergy between the artists, sociologists and young people where what happened arose in a cumulative way where one intervention and perspective enabled the next from someone else and so on. As researchers the process led us to use our own imaginations to 'feel with' (Hollway, 2011: 56) the young project participants and explore the spaces created.

Ethics

There has been considerable attention devoted to ethics in research with young people, especially in relation to the promise of empowerment offered by audio-visual methods (Wiles et al, 2012). Whilst established text-based methods generally resort

to anonymity as a safeguard for participants, this is not always an option with visual research, and may not always be perceived as the right option by participants who are sometimes glad of the identifiability and recognition that the research confers (Clark, 2013). Here we discuss three sets of ethical concerns.

First, asking our participants to share their imagined futures, or inviting them to engage in the process of imagining possible futures for the purposes of this research felt as if we were asking a great deal of them. There's an intimate quality to hopes or dreams, which might not have been previously voiced out loud, or even fully articulated in 'internal conversations' (Archer, 2003). And the process of asking young people at this particular stage of their lives to share some cherished wishes, fears and insecurities made us aware of the invasive nature of our project. However, in addition to the process of imagining itself, this project makes these imagined futures publicly available through its outputs (web-based photographs and video). The unforeseeability and lack of control of the circulation of images – however apparently benign - are challenging for assuring informed consent and some scholars have discussed the possibility of assigning a 'shelf-life' to research materials (Brady and Brown, 2013: 107).

Secondly, we were clear at the outset of our collaborative work that the video-recording would provide material for a video to be put together by Tea. The format and content were open-ended but it was clear that the young people would be seen and in fact they took steps to negotiate their visibility and invisibility across different elements of the project. For instance, when we decided to use some of the workshop photographs to 'think with' (Pyyry, 2013) in the focus groups – something which was not part of the original plan - two of the young women were very decided that they did not want to be recognisable by their peers. They went on to specify that neither their faces nor their hair should be visible, and after some discussion, eventually agreed that it would not be a problem to show their shoes! Whilst they were willing to take part in the project activities in spontaneous and unguarded ways, they did not lose sight of the significance of public presentations of the self. Although they were quick to give their formal consent, most did not read the information sheets we provided which included our contact details and in one focus group for instance, all copies were left in the room once the discussion was over. Nevertheless, since we considered informed consent to be a practical 'situationally attuned' process (Clark, 2013) rather than a once-off agreement, we repeatedly clarified how we might use the material we were producing.

A third 'ethically important moment' (Clark, 2013) concerns the influence of health and safety on the project activities. *Imagine Sheppey* was approved by the University of Kent Ethics Panel in April 2014; each team member underwent Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks; and we carried out risk assessments for all the workshop locations. These checks and precautions felt appropriate at the time and the proposed activities seemed reasonably judged on paper. It was in practice however that we felt the weight of the risks taken and their influence on the development and dynamic of the project activities. For example, during a collaborative 'game' with a long piece of fabric in the wind during the workshop on leisure, there was a strong sense that a process was unfolding without any one of us having a certain idea of what would happen next. Two members of Tea were holding the fabric, one at each end, and we were watching it rise and fall and swing hammock-like in the wind. One of the young men was keen to climb aboard: 'I can hold on to the sides', he insisted. We refused reluctantly, conscious of the real danger of the situation and of the fear of an accident but the cost of this was that a dynamic of authority and responsibility was asserted, along with an infantilisation of

our participants.

Researching the future

Arts-based methods for doing fieldwork

In much visual research with young people, images produced by participants are used as a 'means of reflection' (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2010: 256) often employed alongside formal or informal interviews which create opportunities for discussion amongst peers and researchers. These methods are valuable in the production of 'unofficial truths and everyday insights' (*ibid.*) about themes such as ordinary routines, identity, and space. In the research presented here, we were committed to making use of the visual in some form since, as discussed earlier, this project was conceived to overcome some of the limitations of text-based futures accounts. At the same time, the future focus of the research meant that our central topic of interest was too abstract to be directly visually documented: we needed to design a process and identify tools that would lead to the revelation and stimulation of future orientations of the young participants as well as one which we hoped would produce material for further reflection and talk.

Tea put together a primarily performative methodology which depended on the 'doing of creative, artistic, performative practice for insights and understandings to emerge' (Douglas and Carless, 2013: 55), based on 'a commitment to corporeal experience and experiment' (McCormack, 2010: 43). Although this meant planning different kinds of activities for each workshop site and context, the spirit of the activities was similar: to act in a space 'as if' (Hollway, 2011: 52), to collectively 'propose, envision, suggest, demonstrate, or model how things could be different' (Douglas and Carless, 2013: 59). This meant creating temporary installations using found or made objects, and doing some improvised performances. We sought to stimulate the imaginations of the young participants, to inspire them and give a ''push' to thinking' (Pyyry, 2013: 2) so as 'not [to be] limited by what one conceives as true' (Lapum et al, 2012: 103), as well as to provide space for expressing and exploring their existing images and ideas about the future.

The freedom of the project for participants was, in retrospect, both a strength and a weakness in relation to a lack of future reference points, the problem of immediacy, and the absence of narrative, each of which we discuss here. First we did not give the participants a specific temporal future reference point for the project activities since we wanted them to decide on their future 'reach' (Mische, 2009), for instance, next year or twenty years ahead. In practice, this produced a problem of *indeterminacy* about the temporal space in which we were working. This appeared to cause them to *retreat* into a familiar present in the expression of their ideas as the task was perhaps too abstract for them to handle otherwise. It felt to us (again, with the benefit of hindsight) that a specific future reference point might have paradoxically offered them greater freedom to develop scenarios and storylines that made connections between the present landscape of their lives and their future visions.

Second, the nature of the activities we proposed – making, doing, improvising in relation to spaces, objects and materials – generated a particular temporal character, an *immediacy* in their engagement, one that is similar to the absorption of adults in lego-building noted by Gauntlett (2010). The young people had fun and found themselves acting in surprising ways, for instance, playing with fabric in the wind, and making cone-headed characters with mirror sheets on the street (see

Figure 1). It was clear to us that the objects and materials of this context affected us all, and that the environmental conditions shaped - quite literally in the case of the fabric in the wind - how the activity took place and the visual images it generated (Pyyry, 2013: 2). However, this absorption *in time* and in the affective atmospheres of the workshops made it hard for young people to simultaneously project *through time*, both in the moment and in subsequent discussions. They acted to intervene in the spaces and experienced flashes of transformation which evidently gave them pleasure and amusement, but these activities did not generally elicit existing or produce new insights into their future orientations. They did talk spontaneously about themselves and their lives, however, which leads us to reflect that such activities may have a simpler fit with topics such as identity, belonging and community than about the future *per se*.

Third, our lack of emphasis on narrative in order to avoid predictable biographical forms may also have contributed to the problem of expressing future orientations. Many projects that make use of arts practices as a means to answer sociologically-informed questions use mixed methods to do so and more often than not these include interviews. We certainly talked with the young participants throughout the workshops asking them to reflect on what they had done but did not undertake individual interviews. At times our dialogue produced greater clarity and some insights and at others the young people evaded our blunt questioning or responded with statements that seemed to diminish what we had witnessed them doing.

Still, our activities produced moving and still images and scenes full of interest and energy. However, this also left us with a problem of interpretation. As Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi argue, we need concepts to make sense of what we see in images produced by children, which do not 'always yield to our theories and expectations' (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2010: 258). We paid attention to casual remarks, and to the non-verbal, for instance the roles the young people took and the forms of interaction they created together, as well as to the symbolic language of the performances themselves (Coad, 2007: 488). The images and scenes do suggest episodic 'intimation[s] of possibility' (Davies and Sarpong, 2013: 3) and we would add 'curbs' on what the future may offer. But whilst we can offer interpretations of some of them, we cannot make strong claims about the young people's orientations from them alone. Whilst the collaborative nature of our activities produced surprising images of the future, there was a tension between our efforts to get away from individualised accounts and recognise that the social is produced through interaction, doing and making (Pink, 2001; Ingold, 2013) and the complex amalgam of different people's ways of seeing and being that resulted from this process.

In an attempt to unpack what we had experienced, we organised a final collage-making workshop for the core group to work with a selection of 50 still images taken during the project. First, we wanted participants to reflect on the process of exploring the future though 'creative' methods in a form that 'does not generally stimulate individual concerns about artistic ability' (Leitch, 2008: 44), and which allows participants to disrupt the unity of time or aesthetics (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Second, we encouraged them to reflect on the storylines they might put together across the different activities which could contribute to the character and content of the video, to take it in their own directions (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). This did help clarify their orientations especially when we asked them to talk us through what they had made but it felt to us as if it could only go a small way to render intelligible their improvised performances.

Image elicitation in focus groups

Figure 1

With the conclusion of the artist-led workshops, despite some interesting discoveries and encounters, clarity about how young people on Sheppey imagine their futures was still limited! We therefore decided to undertake more formal and familiar forms of data collection in focus groups that explicitly asked a wider cohort of young people (which did not include our core workshop participants) about their futures. However we sought to do this in a 'linguistically flexible' way (McKnight and Leonard, 2014: 4) using photographs from our workshops for image elicitation. We wanted to stimulate young people to voice and reflect on how they reproduce or are critical of everyday assumptions and public discourses about their futures. We also thought this process would make the focus group participants more central to the interpretive process in the project (Mitchell, 2011), and perhaps offer us confirmation or open new directions in our early readings of the workshop images (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). Overall, this part of the research relied on talk rather than performance, but certainly also engaged the young people's imagination.

We selected twelve photographs from the workshop archive, which we arranged thematically: what now? (reflecting on the present), what next? (pathways to the future), and collaboration and negotiation with others. We asked the young people to write down what each photograph suggested about the future. For the 'warped pavement' in Figure 1 (above), comments included 'bending the rules', 'different perspectives of what is around us', 'heading in a different direction' and 'curve your imagination'. Clearly, the ambiguity of this photograph supported and facilitated the process of creatively thinking about the scope of possibility and potential of the future, retaining its openness and uncertainty. After the free-association exercise we asked a series of questions related to what we saw in the image. For instance, we prompted students to imagine that time was warped and to reflect on what they would like to 'get next' from the future or what they would like to 'fast forward'. At this point the participants' voices diversified. There were examples of seeing a better world, and of checking that the choices made earlier in life were successful (as in the quote at the very beginning of this article), for instance the choice to attend university rather than looking for a job after college, and someone else wanted to see whether close family members were still alive and happy.

Whilst the focus in this article is on the nature of data and processes of data

collection (rather than analysis and findings), it is interesting to note how the same photograph generated very different narratives and orientations. As Pyyry (2013: 2) explains, photographs themselves are performative because they have the capacity to affect us, in this case, animating future-thinking and imagination in (and possibly beyond) the group. Responses to the free-associations exercises demonstrated high levels of reflexivity, imagination, and creativity whereas answers to given scenarios became more bound to familiar narratives and concerns.

Overall these focus groups revealed 'the value of talking about the sensory' (Mason and Davies, 2009: 595) for the multiplicity of narratives contained in visual materials which allow for different stories to be told. In addition, inspirational photographs can support imaginative engagements, capturing unprocessed thoughts and innovative intuitions.

Conclusions

This article has reflected on the methodological challenges of using arts practice as a means of unpacking young people's orientations to the future through the experience of the *Imagine Sheppey* project. Our use of arts practice arose out of a reflexive engagement with previous research into young people's imagined futures using text-based narrative approaches. We sought to use innovative methodologies to better explore difficult to access aspects of the social world that may not be revealed in language (Wiles *et al*, 2010). The fieldwork we carried out was 'an enactive, performative process, one in which data are generated through ongoing tentative experiment as much as they are discovered or revealed' (McCormack, 2010: 40). Whilst this led to creative engagement and the production of rich visual material, we encountered challenges in working across arts and social sciences, assessing the relevance of the images produced for understanding young people's future orientations, interpreting the collaboratively-produced images, and making use of the images in new settings, as we have discussed. To be sure, the arts-based methods did facilitate the empowerment of the fieldwork; young people felt comfortable in taking part in the process and towards the end they felt as they could direct it independently. Yet, we also realised that the project primarily attracted individuals who were already interested in arts, thus limiting the reach of our project in a place where, despite our best efforts, others may have felt they did not have the required cultural capital to participate.

If researching the future is epistemologically and ontologically challenging, creative methodologies do have the potential to shed light on future-imagining because they allow space and time to make visible the process of making something new in the present, and thereby a glimpse of the future. *Imagine Sheppey Fast Forward* engaged with creative methods to spatially explore and transform the present. By making small interventions in the affective and material texture of the present, through a 'cultivation of foresight and imagination' (Davies and Sarpong, 2013: 1), this project allowed participants to sense how familiar places could be otherwise and, now and then, open broader reflections on how change could happen and how the future might come into being. If the spontaneous elaboration of futures by the young participants was limited - perhaps because of the character or indeterminacy of the activities proposed, or the lack of implicit narrative in them – intimations of possible futures are fleetingly present. Finally, the results of our project show that creative methodologies offer concrete possibilities for young people to direct action and work independently, and can create an enjoyable working

environment where young people settle on and make their own contributions often in unexpected ways.

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Figure 1: 'Warped Future' and 'Cone People', Workshop 3, Blue Town High Street, Isle of Sheppey

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