

Book Review

Unfolding Lives. Youth, Gender and Change

By Rachel Thomson (The Policy Press, Bristol, 2009), 208 pp., £52.00 (hbk), ISBN 9781847420510.

This is a book that would appeal to a range of readers, as intended by the author, including those interested in qualitative research, narrative methodology, and contemporary research on gender and youth. Acknowledging the biographical 'turn' recognised within qualitative research, the first three chapters of the book provide a synopsis of relevant and varied epistemological issues that relate to narrative research (within which the author clearly locates herself), a detailed discussion of the methodology and processes by which the author comes to analyse the narratives from the research project she is involved in, and a sound theoretical framework for the analysis she undertakes.

With reference to late modern and feminist theory the book's overarching themes are concerned with detraditionalism, identity and agency. In order to explore this, the book takes longitudinal case studies of four young people from very different backgrounds as they make the transition into adulthood. The case studies utilise the biographical material available from the young people's narratives from a series of interviews, three to five per person, obtained at different points in time over a maximum of ten years. The development of a qualitative longitudinal method of research is one of the main strengths of this book.

In the qualitative custom of openness as a route to validity, the author lays bare her thought processes in constructing her methods. One of the challenges she overcomes is to work with material collected over a significant time span and present it congruently. Following the detailed intricacies and complexities of how she decides to work with the interview material are a test to the powers of concentration, but provide a valuable insight into how innovatively this was achieved, and the possibilities for working with narratives. As such, it would make a stimulating and helpful read for anyone grappling with similar issues.

The case studies are presented in the next four chapters, each chapter devoted to one young person, enabling a depth of detail. Synthesising Bourdieu's social fields and Foucault's aesthetics of existence, the author analyses the interview material from a sociological perspective to understand – not explain- how young people construct their gendered identities within four defined fields: education, home, play and work. In the final chapter, the author moves from the specific of individual biographies towards a discussion of the insights that can be gained from these for understanding late modern cultural constructions of gender more generally.

The author draws on the conceptual dimensions of time and space for her analysis, reflecting the uniquely temporal nature of human consciousness and the relevance of place for identity construction. She explores how the subjects in her case study draw on what is accessible to them, including familial and environmental resources, to develop a sense of who they are and to enable them to define their futures within the context of their unique situations, rather than following a fixed trajectory to adulthood based on class and gender. The results are highly detailed accounts that impart a systemic quality to the young people's narratives as they serialise moving into and out of education, work, and relationships with friends, family and partners.

This is research on young people with a twist, providing as it does an alternative to the risk and resilience model of research more usually drawn on drawn on within social policy in relation to this age group, instead considering concepts such as serendipity and timing (a neat link back to temporality here) as alternative ways of understanding young people's decisions and life chances.

Unfolding Lives is a fascinating and memorable book which does indeed offer a rich understanding of youth, gender and change and which also contributes significantly to the wisdom and practice of working with narratives. I would have liked to see more discussion on relationality, as I think this was left theoretically underexplored, and also a more explicit consideration of involving the participants in the analysis, given the potential to do this offered by the longitudinal method. That aside, this book really spoke to me and I wanted to hear more. To me, it has the potential to be a classic text and an absolute must read for anyone considering research in this field. For that reason, a paperback version (currently not available) would be helpful to make it a more affordable option for students.

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