

# When They Write What We Write: Young People's Influence on Policymaking in Northern Ireland

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**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses young people's influence on a recent policy initiative conducted among Catholic and Protestant school leavers in Northern Ireland's second largest urban area, Derry/Londonderry. The programme, the *Toward Reconciliation and Inclusion Project* or TRIPROJECT, was Northern Ireland's first dedicated attempt to target young school leavers in a survey project and sought to involve the young people in the selection of questions used within the survey. The article opens with a brief discussion on the predicament of anthropology's situation of 'informants' and the criticism that often follows post-field discussions. The article then moves to discuss TRIPROJECT as a case example of applied anthropology actively involving 'informants' in the process of knowledge gathering and analysis presentation, emphasising how informants had control over the process of scholarship. The article ends by addressing this experience within the context of anthropology and the interpretation of questions and answers between 'informants' and those who study them.

**KEYWORDS:** young people, Northern Ireland, policy, praxis, methodology, applied anthropology

## 'Get Down Inte It': Introductions

*See, noh, I think that's wile [very] awkward to answer. Ye can't have just 'aye' or 'noh' type [answer choices] here. It's not enough. Ye have to get down inte it. Ye have to give people more spaces for things, about how they might feel about things. And it's not put the right way neither. It has to say it like we would say it. And let them have as many choices as they want, if ye see what I mean. That's important, so it is.*

Joanne, aged 18

Joanne had a point. Everyone agreed. What Joanne was commenting upon was the phrasing of one of the key questions contained in the first round of pilot questionnaires that had been created with the help of young school leavers aged 15 to 25 in the *Toward Reconciliation and Inclusion Project*, or TRIPROJECT.<sup>1</sup> The programme,

a comprehensive survey initiative aimed at young Catholic and Protestant school leavers in Northern Ireland's second-largest urban area, Derry/Londonderry,<sup>2</sup> involved over nine hundred young people like Joanne throughout the course of the project in creating a survey that specifically addressed topics that they wanted to discuss. In this instance, Joanne's criticism focused on the inability of respondents to actually 'get down inte' a question that concentrated on the likes and dislikes of young people with particular regard to the policing services of Northern Ireland when provided with only a 'yes or no' response. And her comment was made with exacting skill. How could one 'yes or no' option cover the myriad responses that these young people wanted to query and had discussed?

What was refreshing for me as a social anthropologist working in Northern Ireland for over five years, was that Joanne was fully involved in a process of telling me what to write; at the time of the making of the questionnaire for TRIPROJECT, Joanne, and hundreds other like her, had control over the process of scholarship. After working with young people involved in this particular project, I was able to learn about the benefits of altering the ways in which questions were asked. I was informed about *how* to ask particular questions and *what* questions were most important to ask. My position regarding this particular fieldwork was to listen, to learn and to let others lead me to the most appropriate set of questions with which to query their own society. Instead of seeking to make discoveries *about* them, *they* were to *direct me* in how *they* might ask questions of themselves. The result was discovery that was refreshing and revealing.

In anthropology, generally the people with whom we work are not involved in the processes of telling us what questions to ask them, or conferred with when we reveal our discoveries about them. Certainly, throughout the process of fieldwork we stumble upon more effective ways of finding answers to our questions. However, rarely do we directly ask 'informants' whether our questions are effective or useful. Nevertheless, this is the nature of academic inquiry, leading, we hope, to impartial and intriguing assessment of those we study.

Because of this particular situation of the participant-observer, anthropologists most often face critique of their discoveries post-fieldwork, and the fear of the 'native talking back' has become a pertinent topic (for example, Marcus and Fisher 1986; Tyler 1987; Rosaldo 1986; Brettell 1993). The island of Ireland and fieldwork stemming from areas in both the north and the south of the island are no exception. It has been called the 'almost perfect laboratory' in which to observe and discuss the relative relationship between the ethnographers

and those with whom they work (Kane 1982: 3 and as quoted in Brettell 1993: 12), and ethnographic research in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland proves significant for insightful commentary on the developing and the ethical relationships not only between the anthropologist and the 'native', but also between the anthropologists themselves. Only a few examples of critiques in the recent past are: Messenger's original study of the island community of Innis Beag (1983 [1969]); Schepers-Hughes' inquiry of a rural village in the west of the Republic of Ireland (2001 [1977]); and Feldman's research focusing on violence as recalled and retold by incarcerated Northern Irish paramilitary members (1991). These scholars have endured the problematising of their ethnographies by both those with whom they have researched, and those in academia. From Schepers-Hughes being touted as someone 'who should be shot' by those she studied (as quoted in Schepers-Hughes 2001 [1977]: xviii) to Feldman being accused of 'parachute ethnography' (as quoted in Feldman 1992: 595) and 'whatever else this book is, good ethnography it isn't' by some academic critics (Jenkins 1992: 235), participant-observers on the island of Ireland serve as documented testament to the multi-layered critiques and influences that anthropological work can have when accomplished within a highly active, continuing research (and researched) society.

Anthropologists and other scholars currently working in Northern Ireland continue to have ongoing dialogue surrounding the love/hate relationship between communities and their observers. However, where the seeds of continuing study are most commonly seen to flower are in situations when participant-observers who have worked within communities are asked to conduct research to assist policymakers, or to make recommendations on behalf of communities for local or state policy initiatives. (For just a few examples, see McVeigh 1994; Donnan and McFarlane 1997; Bryan 1998; Jarman

1999; Bryan 2000 and 2001; Carter et al. 2003; and Roche 2005a and 2006b). When the anthropologist becomes a facilitator for policy initiatives and research, more often than not, the 'natives' are encouraged to advise, speak up and talk back. With the typical anthropologist's cap slightly askew in this role, anthropologists can learn from these experiences and gain insight into contemporary life that may not have been readily available to them if they had not become involved in finding out what people seek to find out about themselves.

This article examines the current applied environment in Northern Ireland with special regard for initiatives involving young people in the making of policy which affects them. While some anthropologists remain firmly in the halls of academia, other anthropologists and researchers have ventured to work in both the academic and applied arenas. The article briefly begins by exploring some of this applied work and the progression of these influences in Northern Ireland since 1994 with relation to initiatives for young people. Following this, it aims to take the reader on a brief, methodological tour to explore the frankness of the young people's suggestions and discuss how young people creatively informed the TRIPROJECT survey (Roche 2005a), directly improving scholarship and future policymaking. Far from something mysterious, their language use and improvements on the making of the questionnaire were blunt and insightful. It is demonstrated that when asked for their opinion, even those that many ignored as being too difficult to access, resourcefully and directly pointed out what needed to be done. Thus, building on the academic discussions of what happens when those we work among 'read what we write' (Brettell 1993), this article expands the discussion by including aspects of applied anthropology, providing a case example of what happens when an anthropologist steps into the policy arena and is told what to write by the very 'informants' themselves.

## Initial Trends Engaging Young People in the Making of Policy

With young people specifically in mind, since the year of the celebrated paramilitary ceasefires in Northern Ireland in 1994, many of those who have been involved in the progression of youth initiatives have engaged in techniques to attempt to engage the young people in the praxis of the research and in the improvement of their lives in a coming-from-conflict society. Initial investigations capturing the attention of policymaking with regard to young people in Northern Ireland in the mid and late 1990s was through research such as that of McVeigh, Smyth, and Fay et al. Coordinating qualitative and quantitative research projects specifically focusing on and working with young people, such as McVeigh's landmark harassment survey, *'It's Part of Life Here'* (1994), Smyth's *Half the Battle* (1998), Fay et al.'s *The Cost of the Troubles Study* (1999), and Smyth and Scott's *Youthquest 2000 Survey* (2000), these comprehensive reviews illustrated the work that could and needed to be accomplished with young people throughout Northern Ireland with regard to the Troubles and growing social concerns.

One of the most important improvements in accessing and effectively querying young people throughout Northern Ireland came in 2001, when an internal review of the Northern Ireland-wide *Young Life and Times* (YLT) survey focused on problems with their methodology and ways to change it (Schubotz and Devine 2005). As a brief background, YLT was established at the same time as the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey in October 1998. While NILT focused on those over the age of 18, YLT was to be administered to those between 12 and 17. The initial goal was to compare the attitudes of adults to those of young people living within the same household. These surveys, administered annually and initiated by Queen's University of Belfast and the University of

Ulster, were established to examine a range of issues that affected the lives of people in Northern Ireland, and to inform on policy (Schubotz and Devine 2005: 53).

While the survey was exclusively a quantitative exercise, the review of the YLT survey in 2001 revealed that through consultation with young people, issues surrounding the efficacy of this approach could be examined. This consultation led to significant disclosure. For example, it was recognized that a 12-year-old's response to a question would not be the same as 17-year-old's response to a question. Equally, interviewing young people in front of their parents led to concerns surrounding the reliability of the data obtained in this format. At the same time, the consultation revealed that there was ample support for a survey dedicated to young people's concerns (Schubotz and Devine 2005: 53).

The result of the review led to a new and improved YTL survey that was launched in 2003. This version was curtailed to include only those who were aged 16 and administered mainly in the form of a postal pen-and-paper questionnaire.<sup>3</sup> For many questions, young people were invited to supply their own answers or to elaborate on how they felt about certain issues, drawing away from a strictly numerical analysis and adding a qualitative element. All young people living in Northern Ireland who celebrated their sixteenth birthday in that year were invited to complete the questionnaire. In the first year, over 40 percent (or approximately two thousand eligible 16-year-olds) completed the questionnaire (Schubotz and Devine: 53–54). The survey continues to run annually throughout Northern Ireland on this improved basis.

Northern Ireland throughout this contemporary period has witnessed dramatic review of its measures for young people and rafted multiple consultations and policy proposals. Targeted research combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, and integrating young people into the process of creation for policy purposes has been undertaken, provid-

ing valuable information on specific issues such as investigating the political situation with regard to young people (Smyth et al. 2004); seeking answers to questions concerning interface youth violence (Byrne 2005); and exploring violence and disorder among young people (Hansson 2005).

Finally, with the establishment of the office for the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People in October 2003, young people have a watchdog facility that is attempting to create a ten-year strategy in accordance with the principals of United Nations Rights of the Child (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Young People's Unit 2005). Initiatives taken in conjunction with bodies such as the Department for Education, the Department of Employment and Learning, and the Department of Health and Social Services, in addition to numerous nongovernmental agencies, are currently working to further proposals for the betterment of life for young people (cf. Northern Ireland Office 2006).

## Forgotten Voices

Despite the push for further research and policy-enhanced programmes that specifically addressed young people's needs, certain voices were becoming underrepresented in the growing assemblage. Research and policymaking in Northern Ireland remained imbalanced, with almost no research conducted in urban locales other than Belfast and surrounding areas. While it had been established that areas with the highest levels of violence experience the highest levels of deprivation and family poverty in Northern Ireland (Fay et al. 1999), the implications of these connected issues for children and young people, and how they cope with these ongoing and new pressures remained underexplored outside of predominantly urban-based and Belfast-based studies.

Perhaps more importantly, research regarding young people in Northern Ireland, in major-

ity, was and is conducted among those who are still in school. Research had never been undertaken dedicatedly among school leavers (those who exit school at or before age 16) and those who are most at risk and disadvantaged.<sup>4</sup> Although, since its launch in 2003, the new YLT survey continues to use the Child Benefit Record to attempt to include a broad remit of young people and those excluded from school, in majority young people who complete the YLT questionnaire are in school and see themselves continuing with education (cf. Devine and Schubotz 2004). Other authors also have attempted a sampling, but found it difficult to access participants or to have participants complete the survey (for example, Hamilton et al. 2003). These attempts highlight the difficulty in accessing large numbers of young people for research outside the school environment, as well as the continuing use of the school environment as the avenue of choice for researchers to access young people.

### TRIPROJECT's Objectives

It was the aim of TRIPROJECT to begin to address these gaps by creating and administering a survey outside of the Belfast areas and among those who found themselves at risk and disadvantaged. Initial conversations in and around the topic in 2001 (Roche 2003 and 2005a: 28) led to proposals to various funding bodies for a dedicated project to attempt to target as many young people as possible who were at risk and who had left school. TRIPROJECT hoped to work with and query those young people who, in majority, were school leavers from deprived areas in three categories: those who had left to enrol in government training programmes; those who were found to be floating in a 'status 0' category, drifting in and out of programmes for a prolonged period of time (McVicar 1999 and 2000); or those who were permanently idle or unemployed. What was important for TRIPROJECT was the DCCD areas' large popula-

tion of young people and the significant lack of written and community research conducted with the youth population in those areas.

In April 2003, after significant funding had been secured,<sup>5</sup> Derry Youth and Community Workshop (DYCW), a charity and National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) training provider, in cooperation with the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, an organisation supporting the European Union funding programmes, launched the project. Derry Youth and Community Workshop, where approximately 110 young school leavers and approximately 170 young employment seekers enrol every year for NVQ or other training qualifications, gave the project a very strong base location in addition to providing an environment where contact with a significant number of young people in the aimed remit could occur.<sup>6</sup> Equally, due to a 25-year history in DCCD areas, DYCW enabled extensive contact with community organisations, youth groups, governmental agencies, schools and the Northern Ireland youth housing networks, as well as other training organisations. The targeted age range (suggested by young people themselves) initially was to be those aged from 16 to 25 and subsequently was extended throughout the dissemination of the questionnaire, at the young people's and community workers' behest, to include 15-year-olds. By the end of the dissemination of questionnaires, over fifty youth organisations providing care, housing and training for young people in the DCCD areas were participating in the programme. At the conclusion of the circulation (some of which was conducted by youth leaders), 514 questionnaires were returned, with 486 questionnaires included in our final sample for processing (Roche 2005a: 53–54). In total, over 900 young people were involved in TRIPROJECT throughout its lifespan.

The overall objective of the project was to be a community-based programme in which disadvantaged school leavers from both Catholic and Protestant communities had control over design and dissemination of a questionnaire.

The idea was to allow young people to create a questionnaire that covered *their* concerns and to professionally assist them in this process. In this way, the project was to be a marriage of community initiative and academic enterprise. Not only would young people meet and mingle in single and mixed community settings, but they would be assisted in the process of making a questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative elements.

### TRIPROJECT's Young People

To give a sense of the population characteristics of the city in which TRIPROJECT was conducted, Derry/Londonderry and its local voting district areas are split by the River Foyle, with the majority of the city's approximately 66,000 Catholics living in the area commonly called 'Cityside', and the majority of the approximately 24,000 Protestants living in the area commonly called 'Waterside' (Morrissey and Smyth 2002: 39)<sup>7</sup>. The bulk of the city's population is located on the Cityside and that bulk is almost entirely Catholic. Currently with the decline of traditional industries in the area, the city finds itself one of the least lucrative regions in the north-west of the island of Ireland and features as one of the areas with the highest unemployment in Northern Ireland (Foyle Trade Directory 2000; see also Horgan 2005). The DCCD areas continue to struggle, attempting to bring in new businesses and keep remaining employment options open. As implied from this economic decline, deprivation in the DCCD areas is high. Twenty-three of the thirty wards that comprise the DCCD area are classified as deprived under the Robson indices of deprivation. Although the city contains just over 5 percent of all wards in Northern Ireland, it accounts for 10 percent of the fifty most deprived wards in the region (Morrissey and Smyth 2002: 38). While low wages have been identified as a marker of poverty within the DCCD areas as a whole (Horgan 2005), the extent of child poverty

in the DCCD areas is shocking, with income deprivation affecting children at 41 percent compared to the Northern Irish average of 25 percent (Herron 2005: 43).

In compressing combination with ongoing deprivation, all young people currently growing up in this area have been exposed to the Troubles, Troubles-related installations and the sectarianism that persists in the region. Although many strides towards an integrated and peaceful Northern Ireland have been made throughout the past decade, problems still endure. Changes in policing procedures and reported complaints against the police (Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland 2002), paramilitary influences (Hall 2000; Knox 2001 and 2002; Roche 2006a) and persistent segregation (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Community Relations Unit 2003) have influenced the city and its people for four decades.

Considering these elemental attributes of the DCCD areas and the child poverty that the city faces, focusing on young people in DCCD areas for this project was, as one young person stated: 'wile [very] obvious' as young people, he said, 'are everywhere'. Indeed, at the turn of the twenty-first century, over half of the population was under 25 years of age (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2000). Projections in five-year intervals to 2013 indicate the DCCD areas will experience a significant population growth of almost 14 percent, compared to a Northern Ireland growth rate of only 6 percent (Foyle Trade Directory 2002: 4). It was with this in mind, that TRIPROJECT approached those young people in the field to help inform us on what should be included and queried within the survey.

### Involved Every Step of the Way

TRIPROJECT initially was introduced to small groups of young school leavers enrolled in DYCW in early April 2003, ranging in age from 16 to 25. This was done to make sure that the

programme was up to date with young people's suggestions since initial proposals in 2001. With some suggestions in hand and the approval of the young people consulted, TRIPROJECT gained momentum and the project began to make contact and meet with young people throughout DCCD areas based at youth centres, housing agencies, NVQ centres and even on the streets.

Initially, TRIPROJECT predicted that 'snowballing' (for example, Taylor 1993) would be a useful way of querying whether young people wished to participate in the making of the survey. 'Snowballing' in the initial stages worked to some extent, with many young people from community organisations and programmes bringing friends or siblings along for group sessions in the evenings. However, as the project grew, identification of specific locations and relying on the permission and acceptance of community workers in these locations became key to the participation of the young people in the project (Goode 2000; Sterk et al. 2005). Young people who participated in the project—either by giving suggestions, participating in group sessions or filling in the questionnaire—were accessed through programmes and centres where young people mingled and were present.

The approach of the project was to follow its basic premise of being led by young people. Between April 2003 and April 2004, I worked with over one hundred small groups ranging from two to eight in number to gain insight into the concerns, questions, problems and delights that young people had with living in the DCCD areas. Notes were taken at each of these sessions and some sessions were tape recorded. Following this, fully documented discussion groups were pursued throughout the region and in DYCW. Two pilot questionnaires were compiled and the final questionnaire approved and circulated by the end of December 2004.

Discussions taking place in various locations, encompassing everything from smoke-filled recreation rooms to trainee hairdressers' salons

to snooker halls, led to significant improvements in the TRIPROJECT questionnaire. In focused conversations conducted within familiar and comfortable surroundings, young people helped to tease out significant concerns.

Young people were actively involved in all stages of the development of the project, and their early input from April 2003 through to their formation and approval of the final questionnaire were of the utmost importance. Throughout this period, working groups met to discuss what creating a questionnaire required and to examine previous surveys circulated among young people. Several examples of sample questionnaires (many created by anthropologists previously) were provided to be examined by the young people (for some examples see McVeigh 1994; Smyth and Scott 2000; Hamilton et al. 2003; and YLT 2000 and 2003).

## Changing Scholarship

Throughout the course of TRIPROJECT, young people changed the scholarship and the future of policymaking among young school leavers in three prominent ways. Their influence was apparent in their discussions surrounding word choice, the phrasing of the selected questions contained within questionnaires and the method of completing the questionnaire.

One of the first and most noticeable concerns was that the *type of language* that was intended for use in the questionnaire was a very important issue. For example, some research reports have (at least) discussed the results of their survey within 'harder', scientific terms, leading the reader to believe that these were the terms used in the questionnaire (for example, Ellison 2001).<sup>8</sup> These complaints were particularly significant when young people were faced with technical terms for illicit substances. When young people were presented with results from such surveys, a 19-year-old young man summed up most young people's frustration at such questions:

I filled in one of them in school and at my house, and everything. They land [get posted to the house] a lot. And some of the things they're asking you, you don't even know what they're on about, ye know? It's like, aye, okay, just go through then and mark the boxes. Whatever, like. Ye wonder whether people even know what they're bein' asked or even answering to.

When confronted with terms such as, for example, 'amyl nitrite' (also amyl nitrate), the young people laughed. 'What's that?' After researching the term through the internet, the young people discovered that the word was a scientific description for the common drug known as 'poppers'.

'Why not use the real name?' one 17-year-old young woman asked. From early stages, young people decided to use colloquial or 'street' terms for illegal drugs and alcohol, and as a result, all illegal drugs and alcoholic beverages that were listed for query in the TRI-PROJECT questionnaire were listed by what they are known as on the street and by their popularly known names (Roche 2005a: 341–346).

It is also important to mention that such frustration did not stop at scientific terms alone. Other words, such as 'spouse' or 'provocative', also proved problematic for this survey population, and led to voiced disgruntlement of the use of unnecessary wording in questionnaires. A good example of such dissatisfaction was when, in a discussion regarding opinions on and incidents with security forces, a sample question from a previous survey on harassment was randomly selected to show the young people. The sample question asked: 'What form did the harassment take?' The question then listed a selection of choices which the respondents were invited to choose. The choices included 'unnecessary delay', 'provocative language', 'sectarian language', 'threats of physical harm', 'death threats', 'physical jostling', 'physical assault' and an 'other' category where the respondent could write in a response (McVeigh 1994: 208).

All young people in one working group expressed frustration with this selected question due to word confusion. Most did not understand the words 'provocative' or 'jostling'. Not one participant could pronounce the word 'jostling'. When I asked what young people would do if faced with this question, the young people expressed that they would have 'skipped' that question, or 'just ticked any ol' box'. One young woman noted that she would have only ticked the answers that she understood.

Regarding this issue, the young people involved implemented very important but simple alterations. Words were changed by the young people; confusing and scientific names for substances were changed to commonly known street names, other unknown words such as 'spouse' became 'married partner', and ideas of 'provocative language' and behaviour were eventually whittled down to a variety of more particular expressions such as 'being shouted at' or 'using sexist language', and so on.

The second most influential issue that arose throughout discussion with young people was the 'way questions looked' or *how questions were presented and what answer choices were provided*. For example, seeing a series of questions from a previous questionnaire exploring issues with young people and the police, young people felt that the question was too repetitious and thus became 'boring'. Each question in the section followed a pattern of positive thoughts about police services, such as: 'Overall, I believe the police to be honest', 'Overall, I believe the police to be professional', 'Overall I believe the police to be helpful', and so on. The respondent then was provided with answer choices which were: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' (Hamilton et al. 2003: 100–103).

When faced with this set of questions, young people felt they were 'good questions'. They liked the way that the questions appeared on the page and felt they were getting at issues that were pertinent to them. However, the young people in the consulting group felt that the

questions were phrased in a way that the selections were 'all positive'. A 17-year-old young woman stated:

Aye, I like them enough. But they are all about how good they are. Do ye know what I mean? I mean, what if you were to give questions that were the same, but mixed up? 'Overall, I think the police are crap', that sort of a way, ye know.

Fears of automated responses in and around questions that young people felt were repetitious led to attempts to explore various ways that young people could choose the questioning they wanted. In this particular instance, young people merely felt that to change some of the questions to a 'more negative' sounding choice would stop young people ticking 'any ol' box'. In this way, in the TRIPROJECT questionnaire, young people posed questions that were both 'negative' and 'positive' sounding, such as 'In general, I believe the police to be helpful' and 'In general, I don't think the police understand young people' (Roche 2005a: 339).

After multiple discussions following the pilots in December 2003, young people involved in TRIPROJECT decided that in addition to questions querying 'where someone is now', informing on current training, education and employment status, the questionnaire would include feelings about school, questions on threat, safety, substances, fun/boredom, policing, paramilitary influences, sectarian concerns, and questions that probed what could be improved within the city (Roche 2005a: 323–348). All responses were agreed by the young people and, with the exception of a few questions that were to be directly compared between other surveys (for one example, cf. Roche 2005a: 76–79), all responses were selected by the young people in language that they felt was appropriate for their given age range and demographic.

A third and final example of the young people's influence related to *how to complete the questionnaire*. From the outset, young people ex-

pressed that they were most comfortable with a pen-and-paper questionnaire that they could complete in their own time. Although a computerised version could have been made available (and in many ways would have been more convenient for later processing), young people were uninterested in this option.

Throughout the course of the circulation, the fact that the questionnaire was a self-complete questionnaire became something of an advantage. Its portability was its asset. Able to complete questionnaires in leisure rooms, in housing associations, at the football pitch and in youth clubs, young people could sit in groups and individually complete the questionnaire either at a table or in a comfortable chair. Two young women completed the questionnaire sitting on top of a pool table, while three young men sat on a set of concrete stairs, each with a mug of tea. Being free from a computer, at least for this sample, proved to be a positive feature.

### Changing Anthropologist

The TRIPROJECT survey ultimately was a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods, both community and academic philosophies, and an anthropologist can learn much from becoming involved in projects that strive for such unity. While initially I qualitatively concentrated on discovering what broad topics were best to query for the survey, the young people called my attention to the specific features they considered the most important of survey completion: understanding the questions and feeling comfortable answering them. Not just the topics mattered, but the detail of questions and their responses put on paper in an adequate and understandable way was the strongest imperative. Selection of specific answer choices was agonisingly thought out as young people became acutely aware of the quantitative situation where respondents would only have a discrete selection of choices. Equally, throughout this process I too became more

aware. Selection of question type, how questions were expressed, in what tense questions were phrased, what vocabulary was used in answer choices, and a host of other factors, emerged as significant in ‘making or breaking’ a question. Although these may seem obvious concerns, the young people involved in TRIPROJECT showed that they can be and have been unnoticed in questionnaires of the past, also highlighting that these concerns are something which the more qualitative sciences may have equally overlooked. If as scientists—statistical, qualitative or otherwise—we are in the business of asking questions about what we observe, there is much to be learnt from hearing and learning about different ways to ask a question. Debates concerning the pros and cons of qualitative versus quantitative methods are common, while those who work with both media are more rare. Hammersley, in the latter part of his book *What’s Wrong with Ethnography?* (1992), explores this debate between the qualitative and the quantitative. Arguing against exclusionary ideologies that claim that ethnography relies on theoretical inference and quantitative work relies on statistical inference, the author states that the dichotomy is not as plain as this, that both approaches require large amounts of inference, and that as ethnographers or statisticians, we should see our options more as a range of possibilities (Hammersley 1992: 159–173). My experience gained throughout the course of the TRIPROJECT programme illustrated the importance of asking needed questions to key groups, and also highlighted the importance for questions to be understood by those who are requested to respond to them. Whether this is pursued within a qualitative or quantitative arena, the skill of asking a question that is understood and comprehensible to our audience remains the same.

Equally, the young people have illustrated that questionnaires and indeed, asking questions in general, do not and should not have a ‘one size fits all’ label. The detail with which young people laboured and advised on indi-

vidual questions for their particular audience was more than commendable. The young people involved in the project demonstrated a genuine concern for the reception of questions, balancing options for those in both Catholic and Protestant communities, and asking difficult questions that had yet to be asked in surveys previously conducted (for example Roche 2005a: 218–226). This time taken to think about what word choices mean to the individuals within communities perhaps also is something that is underrated by ethnographers. Sometimes as anthropologists we may imbue and ascribe things, words and actions with meaning, while for the ‘natives’ these may be more mundane aspects of life, or may simply mean nothing at all. Conversely, anthropologists may miss important topics altogether. Although some have blatantly been accused of ‘not so much interpret[ing] as transform[ing]’ field responses (Jenkins 1992: 234 on Feldman 1991), often the misinterpretation of responses from those with whom we work is more common than we care to admit. As Scheper-Hughes states: ‘We now realize that there is no escape, no exit from the deeply subjective component of ethnographic research and writing. (...) How can we know what we know other than by filtering our observations and field experiences through the subjective categories of thinking and feeling—call them biases if you will—that represent our particular ways of being in the world (...)?’ (2001 [1977]: 53). Listening to what young people sought to ask of themselves, what choices they provided for each other, and what were ultimately the most important topics for them to cover provided an excellent reminder for me to continue to examine both the interpretation of the question posed, and the anthropologist’s interpretation of it afterwards.

These points have been lessons for this anthropologist. Working within an environment in which young people were creating questions they would ask of each other, I was provided with an opportunity to witness how often questions are misunderstood, how often they may

make people feel uncomfortable, or how often they are at times irrelevant for the respondent. The thoughtful and transparent way in which these young people created, examined and altered questions for the survey, flagged up flaws in the business of asking questions, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and reminded this ethnographer to be not only thoughtful of the response of the 'informant' but to be critical of her original inquiry as well.

## Conclusions

To end, issues brought to the fore throughout this article are not intended to flood the field with misgivings about previous questionnaires and their response rates, but rather to add to the debate on the need for accessible techniques when approaching young people with qualitative and quantitative projects. As cultural processes and needs change, so must the approaches of academics and policymakers. Throughout the making of the questionnaire, issues surrounding language selection were a significant and useful problem brought into the debate by the young people. Equally, problems surrounding the way questions were phrased and presented provided much insight into how young people, and particularly how those who may have reading or writing difficulties, may experience a questionnaire. While some (including the author) may have thought that a computer version of the questionnaire would have been fun and easy to complete, for this sample, this would have been a hindrance as young people who experience deprivation may have less access to and/or feel less comfortable with this medium. And these remain only a few of the discoveries made throughout TRIPROJECT's three-year journey.

What anthropology can most add to continuing debates which surround involving 'subjects' in research is the usefulness of first-hand inquiry and learning how to approach those with whom we work. By being provided sev-

eral years in which to consult young people and gain their insights, this survey was tailored to the particular concerns of these young people. However, this does not make the questionnaire a rarity. On the contrary, questions can be compared, highlighted and brought up to date by others interested in reaching those out of school or those in hard-to-access youth populations. Mistakes that were made throughout TRIPROJECT can become the gain of future surveys and populations.

What is most needed within academic research and reporting is the transparency with which the young people themselves approached their task for TRIPROJECT. Of course while this process of consultation was something far different than that of preparing a text that is required to have only one voice—that of the ethnographer—perhaps something can be gained from the honest 'hard-knock talk-back' school of applied approaches. Perhaps lessons involving attempts to make policy with 'informants' can lend instruction to the ethnographer regarding the protocol of how to interpret responses from their informants. And the young people involved in TRIPROJECT provide an excellent example—while some of us may have deduced that young people may not be interested in particular questions in circulated questionnaires, it has been discovered they may not have understood the question or the answer or both.

What lessons can be provided from exercises such as these are the *interpretations* that are provided, both by those asking the questions and those giving the responses. For when anthropologists are accused of misrepresenting the responses of 'informants', perhaps it may be valuable to review the approach and interpretation of the method of inquiry. Certainly it may be useful to remember always that although, as anthropologists, we may provide representations of our 'informants', it is imperative that we recognise that when important questions are asked, those with whom we work must understand exactly what we are asking of them in the first place.

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## Notes

1. Further clarification on the topics discussed here can be found in the original reports published by Blackstaff Press (Roche 2005a and 2005b). These texts are available online at the ORB Children's Database at <http://www.ark.ac.uk/orb/childsummaries/RocheR05.htm>. Some material used here is reprinted from the original text.
2. In the seventeenth century the place known by its Irish Gaelic name, 'Dóire' (meaning 'oak grove'), was officially named 'Londonderry' due to the London Livery Companies' financial interests in the city. Community factions still argue over the official naming of the city; however, colloquially, the city is often referred to as 'Derry' by both Protestant and Catholic citizens who hail from there. The city's district council areas are referred to as the Derry District Council areas (DCCD) and this expression is most commonly used in this article.
3. YLT also offered the mediums of online completion or completion over the telephone as two other ways to participate in their survey (Schubotz and Devine 2005: 54).
4. Other authors have sought to include some more at-risk participants within their samples. See for example, Hamilton et al.'s work on policing and accountability with regard to young people (2003), and Ellison's inquiry into young people, crime, policing and victimisation (2001).
5. Funding for TRIPROJECT was provided by the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation/Peace II Funds with the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, The Northern Ireland Policing Board, Derry Youth and Community Workshop, The Derry City Council, the Ireland Funds, The Community Relations Council and The Honourable Irish Society. This article was written while an ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of History and Anthropology, Queen's University Belfast (PTA-026-27-0865).
6. This figure is taken from 2003–2004 commencement rates. Steady occupation rates, or the rates of young people who remain at DYCW for over a six-month period, can be slightly less.

7. Approximately 11,000 Catholics also live on the Waterside.
8. It is hard to know whether Ellison exclusively used scientific terms for illicit drugs in his questionnaire because a sample of the questionnaire is not included in the published report.

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