2
Researching Young People’s ‘Private’ Space

They seem to think that teenagers aren’t very bright. But I haven’t found that to be the case. I listen to kids. I respect them. I don’t discount anything they have to say just because they’re only 16 years old. (John Hughes, filmmaker [1985] Chicago Herald Tribune)

All of us reading this book will have been a teenager at some time or may even still be experiencing those years. While there are underlying ‘biological’ and ‘psychological’ effects of this experience that may indeed be similar across the generations, there is also a plethora of cultural and social differences that in many ways make the experience of being a young person a very individual and unique one. These experiences change from decade to decade, year to year, even month to month in a rapidly changing global world (Miles, 2000; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003; Nilan and Feixa, 2006) and in what has been termed a ‘risk’ society (Beck, 1992; Mythen and Walklate, 2006) in which young people have to negotiate the many twists, turns and contradictions that make up their biographies and which infiltrate their everyday lives (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; Roberts, 2009; Woodman, 2009). Each of us grows up in quite different circumstances all of which have an effect on how our teenage, and thus adult, lives ‘shape up’, which, consequently, makes understanding young people’s lives as a sociological phenomenon a difficult and complex task.

This book is one such attempt to undertake this task of exploring young people’s lives and identities today as lived out within the context of what can be understood as ‘private’ or ‘personal’ space. Specifically, I focus on the teenage bedroom as an example of such space, a space in which youth subjectivities are understood as fragmented, multiple,
fleeting, impermanent and often bewildering (Bennett, 1999; Stahl, 1999, Muggleton, 2000) as well as collective, holistic and affirming. It is an attempt to make sense of the ways in which young people use their proximate spaces or their ‘immediate life spaces’, as Willis (1990, p. 2) refers to them; spaces that are situated in the home and are part of their social and cultural lives as they embark on their journeys towards their ‘emerging adulthoods’ (Arnett, 2004). It is also an attempt to understand how such sites potentially afford some sense of permanency, stability and identification for a young person in a post-modern, risky world.

Earlier on in the introduction to this book, I outlined the different ways in which the concept of private space is understood by young people themselves in the context of their individual lives. In summary, private space has been described by the participants in this study as a solitary space, a space of autonomy, of escapism, one that is removed from the public sphere, a space of ownership and control, hierarchical and multiple, ‘controllable’ and controlled. Private space also acts as an identity space, a space of production, consumption, conformism, resistance and rebellion, among many other things. Often these experiences are intermittent and interchangeable, with the meaning, significance and relevance of bedroom culture changing frequently. Private space and bedroom culture, then, are integral to the everyday lives and experiences of young people, at whatever level they participate in it, yet dependent on many different factors, including, among others: age, gender, geographic location and family formation.

Given the complexities in understanding the different conceptualisations of bedroom culture and the different interpretations of private space by young people in the context of their social and cultural lives, it is important to consider how one might go about doing research in this context in order to capture and bring to life what goes on in such a culture and a space. By taking you on my research journey in this chapter I explore matters of research practice with a number of focal points, including: assessing the methodologies I utilised; discussing the issues, problems and dilemmas I encountered along the way with particular reference to the methodological tools I used; exploring the role of the young people themselves in the research process; and assessing the ‘authenticity’ of the research findings given the context of private space and my position as a researcher spending time in both young males’ and young females’ bedrooms.

My exploration of young people and bedroom culture drew on an ethnographic approach. Ultimately in this chapter I ask the question