“I’d keep them tidy”: domesticity, work and nostalgia in girls’ imagined futures described in essays written by 11-year-olds in 1969.

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Introduction

One of the most common questions that English children are asked by adults is ‘what do you want to be when you grow up?’ Much research has explored children’s aspirations, mostly focusing upon their educational choices and work orientations after leaving school, and often using structured questions requiring brief responses. This reflects mainstream sociological or developmental psychological conceptualisations of ‘the child’ as a socialisation project, where children are understood as ‘becomings’ rather than as ‘beings’ (Qvortrup, 1985). Children’s lives in the here and now (or even their pasts), are not paid much attention. A smaller body of research has looked at children’s hopes for their future family lives and in some cases allowed children to provide more detailed accounts of their imagined futures. This chapter adopts this more narrative perspective to analyse girls’ imagined futures, described in essays written in 1969 by children who were part of the 1958 British birth cohort stud - the National Child Development Study (NCDS). Our focus is on the ways that the girls in this sample assumed responsibility for childcare and domestic work. The rich material generated, points to the methodological strengths of this technique of eliciting essays about the future.

The essays are understood as narratives, broadly defined – narratives that ‘carry traces of human lives that we want to understand’ (Squires et al., 2013, p2). The essays were written towards the end of a period of economic boom, and the broader socio-economic context in relation to women’s roles needs to be borne in mind when reading them. The role of “housewife” had been (re-) emphasised following the Second World War as one way of removing women from the labour force (Wilson, 1977) and the period also coincides with the advent of new domestic technologies during the 1950s and 1960s (Silva, 1998), as well as increasing feminist awareness of
domestic labour as a form of work (for example, Gavron, 1966, Comer, 1974, Oakley, 1974). This period in British history has been explored from a social historical perspective by Angela Davis, using oral histories of women’s experiences of motherhood 1945-1970. Davis notes that

The 1950s are often considered as a ‘golden age’ for the family, while in contrast the late 1960s are seen as years of dramatic change, with rising illegitimacy and divorce rates, and critiques of the family by second-wave feminists stressing the family could in fact be a source of harm to women. However, continuity existed alongside these changes. Throughout the period women were encouraged to stay at home with young children and the nuclear family was considered the ideal. (Davis 2006 p1)

Thus, it could be argued that children were writing the essays at a turning point in British social history – from the brief “golden age” of the nuclear family, at the cusp of major changes in family life that were to take place during the 1970s. The chapter suggests that children’s narratives can only be understood with reference to the social and historical context in which they were produced.

The next section briefly reviews literature on children’s aspirations, some of which has used children’s writing as data. The chapter then describes our methods and approach to analysis, before focussing on domestic labour and girls’ imagined domestic lives within the essays. We find that girls’ narratives reflect context, time, values, norms and expectations, and the assumption that women will undertake care with lives firmly located in the domestic sphere. The chapter concludes with some reflections about what can be learnt about children’s lives by using children’s writing as a source of data.

**Background literature**

Much existing research on children’s aspirations falls within the paradigm of socialisation theory and pays little attention to children’s lives and experiences at the time of data collection (eg., McCallion and Trew, 2000, Watson, Quatman and Edler, 2002). Bold claims have been made about the predictive power of aspirations expressed by children at age 11 for later outcomes (see for example Schoon and Parsons 2002). Some studies, however, have used children’s writing as a source of data about children’s future hopes. An early cross-cultural example is Goodman’s (1957) study conducted in Japan and USA in the mid 1950s, in which 1,250 Japanese
children and 3,750 US children in grades 1-8 (age range 6-13) were asked to write ‘topic essays’ on “What I want to be when I grow up, and why”. Goodman noted that for girls:

Interest in ‘housewife’ and ‘mother’ roles declines from younger to older groups in both countries…. There may have been a good many girls who felt, without making it explicit, as did an American sixth-grader: “I want to be a housewife, but if I have to go to work I will be a social worker”.

Within British sociology, Joseph (1961) reported on a study carried out in 1956 with 1,300 14-17 year olds, asking them ‘to write an autobiographical essay imagining they were near the end of the lives and to write their life stories from the time that they left school’, as well as to complete questionnaires directly asking about occupational choices and expectations for the future. Her paper analyses girls’ accounts, and is remarkable for the poignant finding that over a third of the girls who married record the death of their husbands, the majority well before old age’ (Joseph, 1961 p182). This alerts us to the historically-situated nature of knowledge production - the girls would have been born during the Second World War. Several accounts imagine violent deaths, or husbands with amputated limbs. Joseph also found the majority of the girls imagined ‘home-making as their vocation, and full-time or part-time work outside the home as a secondary interest’ (p183). Prendergast and Prout (1980) in a qualitative interview-based study conducted in 1979 with 15 year olds’ about their health knowledge, asked girls to describe their views of motherhood. They emphasise ‘the active role that children play in the construction of their own views and futures, rather than a more straightforwardly deterministic model which would see children as products of a social culture’ (p517). They also found that many girls gave accounts of how mothers experience their lives which were far richer, more detailed and certainly less normative than expected. Most children’s accounts were dominated by… negative aspects of motherhood – for example, isolation, boredom and depression. This knowledge seemed to emanate from the children’s own observations and judgements and sometimes… their own direct experience of extended childcare (p519).

Two influential examples of research that used children’s writing on futures to explore their identities are Steedman’s (1982) study ‘The Tidy House’, and Halldén’s studies with Swedish children. Steedman analysed a freely-written narrative produced by three 8 year old working class girls in school during a school term in 1976. The narratives were about two couples, their romance, their children, and childcare. From
this, she explored the ways in girls are socialized into adult feminine identity. Steedman suggested that: ‘The tidy house is the house that the three children will live in one day; their characters walk to the shops and the nursery school through the streets of the children’s own decaying urban housing estate’ (p17). She indicated a number of ways of reading the children’s text:

It makes most sense to read ‘The Tidy House’ as a kind of historical document, a fragment of a life that cannot now be resurrected, which is open to interpretation by what we know from other sources about childhood, working-class life and female socialisation. (p26)

She argues that the children’s writing illuminates ‘the recent historical experience of working-class childhood’ (p26).

The Swedish educational psychologist Gunilla Halldén conducted two studies with children, based on their writing about their imagined future families (1994, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2004; with 31 children aged 8-10, and subsequently with 141 children aged 13-14). The research was conducted in cooperation with the teachers, so she knew a good deal about the context in which the children generated their stories. Teachers asked children to write about ‘my future family’, over the course of two months. Halldén notes that

…the data consist of children’s fiction mediated through a language and written in a particular tradition. What is being presented …are the children’s perspectives, fictions and stereotypes’ (p65).

The narratives can be looked upon as a version of reality – we can thus talk about identity as created through narratives, and cultural artifacts and media products influence these narratives (Halldén, 2007). For Halldén, children’s narratives give an insight into children’s ideas about family life, gender and generation, and the social positioning of adults they identify.

Tinklin et al (2005) describe research with 200 14-16 year olds in Scotland conducted in 2000 on their anticipated work and family roles (based on questionnaires and group interviews). They found that the young people were ‘almost unanimous’ that responsibility for childcare should be shared. However, in discussions,

Some girls said that they thought that it was more likely to be the woman who cares for the children, however, because she carries them and forms a stronger
bond with them and that in reality few men actually take primary responsibility. (p135).

Younger children’s notions of themselves in time have also been explored in research by Allison James (2005) with 10 year old English children. This concentrates on time passing and the life course. She argues for the need to ‘reclaim for children their subjectivity, an ability to be reflexive about their lives and their identities and to articulate this to themselves as well as to others’ (p248). She points out that, despite shifts in thinking and theorising about children and childhood, ‘children are still rarely credited with this kind of agency’, and suggests that ‘although the concepts of autobiography or of life history have been most often used by social scientists with respect to adults, they are also pertinent to the discussion of children’s lives, despite the relative shortness of the time children have lived’ (p249). Berry Mayall, in research with 9-10 year olds and 12-13 year olds in London exploring understandings of childhood, noted that children are acutely aware that ‘they must work on the project of their own life – how best to juggle possibilities and constraints in the here and now. And they must learn at home and school what they need for adult life’ (Mayall, 2002, p47). Most recently, Zartler explored imagined future families with 10-year-olds in Austria, using photography and interviews, emphasising that children’s future imaginations give an impression of how they perceive the social world surrounding them. Listening carefully to the stories children construct … opens a window onto their perceptions of society (Zartler, 2015, p.532).

Social historians Barron & Langhamer (2017b) have analysed essays written by 12-16 year old boys in 1937, collected as part of Mass Observation, on the topic of ‘When I leave school’. They emphasise that that the essays reveal the ‘boys’ own understandings of the worlds they inhabited’ (p367).

In summary, these studies point to the importance of social and historical context and the richness of the material produced by children when asked to write about their imagined futures. They also illustrate the persistence over time of gendered assumptions about domestic work and childcare.

Methods
When the NCDS children were eleven years old (in 1969), they were given a short questionnaire to complete at school about their interests, favourite subjects, and aspirations. In addition, they were asked to write an essay about what they thought their life would be like at age 25. The instructions given were as follows:

Imagine you are now 25 years old. Write about the life you are leading, your interests, your home life and your work at the age of 25. (You have 30 minutes to do this).

Of the 14,757 children who participated in the age 11 sweep, a total of 13,669 completed the essay task. The essays present a unique opportunity, to contextualise the children’s writings in relation to other data from them, and their parents, within the NCDS sample. We know from statistical information, for example, that 61% of mothers in the sample as a whole (n=14,757) reported being in work at some time since the child was seven (only 3.2% n = 268 were in professional or managerial occupations, compared with 20% n=3090 of fathers); and 66% n=8551 of mothers reported that the father took an equal role in ‘managing’ the child and a further 24% described the father as having a significant role (Elliott and Morrow, 2007; Joshi and Hinde, 1993).

Attempting to analyse the whole sample of over 13,000 essays would be a daunting task, so an initial sub-sample of 500 essays were selected. In order to ensure sufficient numbers in subgroups to facilitate some simple comparisons to be made, the selection was stratified according to three key variables: child’s gender; social class and family structure; and the child’s ability (as measured using a general ability test, similar to an IQ test, at age 11). Essays were transcribed and coded for frequency of mention of various themes in the writing, and further coded using NVivo for in-depth qualitative analysis (see Elliott and Morrow, 2007 for further details). Utilising archived research data raises specific ethics questions, particularly in relation to informed consent (Alderson 1998; see also Parry and Mauthner, 2004). This chapter focuses on girls’ accounts only (see Elliott, 2010, which also includes boys’ imagined futures).

**Approaches to Coding and analysing the essays**

Initial descriptive analysis of the content of the essays is presented elsewhere (Elliott and Morrow 2007). This was based on developing a coding frame for the essays that aimed to capture the main themes discussed by the children. Some elements of the
coding frame were shaped by the instructions given to the children to write about their ‘interests, home life and work’, while others emerged from recurrent topics introduced by the children themselves. For example, it was striking how many boys talked about football within their essays, and that a substantial minority of children described the type of house they would like to live in. It was also noticeable that pets and animals were mentioned relatively frequently.

In this paper we focus on a close analysis of the subsample of essays transcribed in 2007, with particular attention to the way that girls wrote about their future lives and responsibility for children and domestic tasks. This type of detailed descriptive qualitative analysis can help to generate insights and ideas that could be further explored with the whole sample of over 11,000 essays if innovative machine learning techniques are developed for use with the textual material. The essays produced by the children will have been shaped both by the context in which they were produced (that is, at school, with a time limit of 30 minutes) and by the fact that the children knew they were part of a longitudinal study. Thus the essays should be understood as externally required narratives rather than as the product of a spontaneous or inner felt need to provide an autobiographical account of the self (Stanley 2000: 41).

The aim here is therefore to take what the children wrote very much at face value. Inevitably the themes identified are a product of our understandings of the texts. However, the intention is not to interpret the essays from a psychological or psychoanalytic standpoint, nor to speculate about what is not written about. A sociological approach takes children’s writing to be equivalent to a snippet of conversation, which needs to be contextualised and used with other data collection methods. One useful heuristic device is to imagine the person whose words are being analysed ‘looking over the researcher’s shoulder’—how would they feel about what has been produced from the analysis of their essays? This approach to analysis also reflects an ethical concern not to exploit or degrade the individuals who have provided the data in the first place. In analysis of young Swedish children’s narrations in words and pictures, Anggard (2005), uses West and Zimmerman’s (1987) classic work on ‘doing gender’. She emphasises that children are co-constructors of gender:
‘they are actively involved in constructing their own childhoods and identities’ (Anggard, 2005:540). We will draw on Anggard’s analysis later in the chapter.

Children’s activities within NCDS

Before the children wrote the essays, they completed a questionnaire about activities outside school and this gives some insight to their daily lives. In the total essay sample, (n=13,669) it is notable that as many as 45% boys (n=3116) and 64% girls (n=4236) described helping at home ‘most days’; 7.5% boys (n= 515) and 20% of girls (n=1307) described cooking ‘most days’; and 33% of girls (n=2182) mentioned sewing or knitting outside school hours compared to 2.5% of boys (n=168). There were no large differences according to social class or family structure though girls with ‘no father figure’ were slightly more likely to report helping at home (69% n= 232 cf. 60% n= 1172 girls in non-manual households).

General findings about imagined family life: gendered futures

Across the NCDS sample as a whole, the majority of girls (90%) imagined themselves having some form of paid work. 8% (n=543) imagined themselves being housewives (see Elliott and Morrow 2007 for further details: about 2.6% (n=135) of girls did not mention work or were unclassifiable (n=38)). For the essay sub-sample, just under half of the children made some mention of having their own children, mostly within nuclear family norm of two (but some children mentioned adopting or fostering children); a proportion mentioned some kind of domestic labour, far more girls than boys; girls were more likely to describe childcare together with cooking and cleaning or multiple tasks; and girls with non-manual fathers slightly more likely to write about domestic tasks in particular sewing, knitting or needlework.

There were few differences in relation to girls’ job aspirations, in that girls who wanted to become teachers or other professionals were as likely to write about domestic work as were girls who aspired to be clerical workers or shop assistants. Girls who wanted to be housewives (n=22) overwhelmingly (n=20) wrote about domestic tasks. Although boys and girls were equally likely to write about childcare in isolation from other tasks (2.5% (n=6) of boys and 2.0% (n=5) of girls), girls were much more likely than boys to write about childcare together with cooking and cleaning or to write about multiple tasks that might include childcare (4.5% n=11 of
boys cf. 22% n=55 of girls). Gender differences were much more marked than social class or ability differences. Relationships with ‘significant others’ were frequently mentioned, and children were slightly more likely to mention their mother than their father; pet animals were mentioned frequently by both boys and girls, though girls were more likely to mention close relationships with family members. Halldén (1994, p. 66) also found that the theme of relationships ‘is more clearly in evidence in the girls’ writings than in the writings of the boys’ (see also Anggard 2005). Social class made a small difference in whether children mentioned their father, in that non-manual fathers were more likely to be mentioned than manual. Gender differences in expectations of getting married and having children were not particularly marked, and social class differences were only small, in that children from non-manual backgrounds were slightly more likely to say they would not be married. Indeed, other aspects of the essays are not so markedly differentiated by gender, and it would be misleading to overstate the case.

**Categories of domestic work**

Within the sociology of work literature, domestic labour has been divided into three inter-related categories: housework, which involves the routine daily tasks necessary to the running of the home; childcare and other caring activities; and ‘household work’, which includes ‘self-provisioning’, such as growing vegetables, house maintenance and repair, car maintenance and so on. These vary according to the local economy (Pahl, 1984). While the study of children’s work in majority world countries usually includes an analysis of children’s domestic contributions (Punch 2001), in the UK context, children’s involvement in domestic tasks has not been the focus of study and what little data there are on children’s housework ‘seem to be presented in passing, as a side issue in the discussion of the sexual division of labour between spouses’ (Morris, 1990, p150).

A number of themes related to domestic labour were identified within the essays. Children (mostly girls) wrote variously about the following: the characteristics of their imagined children (such as their physical appearance, managing children who are ‘difficult to look after’; ‘mischievous’; ‘they greet me with smiles’; ‘energetic’). They included names of their imagined children, often explaining that these were the names of their current friends at school (thus linking present and future). Some
described complicated arrangement for managing childcare, involving babysitters, their mothers or other family members, neighbours, friends, and reciprocal childcare arrangements. There were graphic accounts of how babies will affect their lives: ‘crying’, ‘a battle to get them to go to sleep’. The organisation of daily life features in many accounts: getting their children ready for school, bathing them and getting them ready for bed, and telling bed-time stories, (with specific detail given for bed times). There were descriptions of time spent with children, playing with children, going on trips, picnics, and on holidays. Girls described helping their children and being generous to them: ‘I give them anything they want’. They also described homework; taking children to church, being a childminder as well as looking after their own children; and in one example a girl described how ‘my children help me’. Domestic tasks included accounts of preparing food, helping with cooking, feeding babies and pets. Housework included descriptions of washing up, washing clothes, ironing, cleaning, spring cleaning, often with specific days of the week mentioned for doing these things. As will be seen below what is striking is the variety of tasks and level of detail provided.

Boys were more likely to mention gardening and outdoor jobs, such as allotments, describing specific tasks, such as planting seeds and bushes, weeding, and cleaning or washing the car, reflecting clearly the domestic division of labour at the time. Shopping, doing the shopping, ‘waiting for my wife while she does the shopping’, having a day off/afternoon off to shop (again on a specific day of the week). Paying the bills and budgeting was mentioned in some detail by one child.

Self-provisioning in the form of sewing was mentioned only by girls, as was knitting, making clothes for specific people (sister, children, husband); mending clothes and darning was also described. DIY (though it wasn’t called this at the time) was mostly described by boys and included making furniture, putting up fences, painting and decorating, ‘mending things we need’, and odd jobs.

However, boys and girls described helping others with housework: helping their parents, and for example one boy imagines how he visits his parents ‘once a week to mow the grass’. Some children imagined they were still living with their parents and described helping with housework. Others described helping neighbours, looking after
younger siblings, and helping them with homework. Life choices were linked with family composition, and one boy mentioned that he would choose a specific job so that he will see more of his family; another boy mentioned that he will be a doctor but anticipated such long hours at work that ‘I hardly see my children’. A perhaps surprisingly large number of girls anticipated combining work and childcare.

**Girls combining paid and domestic work**

We now focus on a small selection of essays by girls, particularly on how they imagine combining domestic and paid labour and how they describe daily life. The examples chosen are not strictly representative of the whole sample, but have been selected to illustrate some of the richness and diversity of the data and the possibilities for further analysis. In the final section, two exceptional examples where girls write nostalgically about their childhoods, making links between their present childhood and future adulthood, are discussed. (Note: children’s spellings have been corrected).

**Managing childcare**

Several girls give detailed descriptions of managing childcare, describing babysitters, family, neighbours, friends, and reciprocal childcare arrangements. In the following example, a girl imagines sharing childcare with her husband:

I work in a factory. I have to get out of bed at six o’clock and make breakfast for three. Then I put on my coat and catch the 7-30 bus to Nottingham. When I'm working my husband dresses Sally and takes her to play school and at 1.30 in the afternoon I come from work and fetch Sally from play school and get her dinner. My husband has his dinner then goes to work. I stop at home and do the washing and jobs at home I usually sew and make clothes. I earn £20 a week my husband earns £25.

One girl imagined herself being a childminder, as well as looking after her own children. This was common as a form of childcare at the time (Hughes et al 1980):

I’d like teaching ballet. In my spare time I’d be knitting or playing the piano. I’d like to be married with three girls and three boys. I’d give them nice clothes to wear and keep them tidy but not spoil them. I’d send them to ballet if they wanted to go…. … when my children go to school I’d look after some little babies while their mothers go to work. …

There were several descriptions of reciprocal childcare, for example: ‘The lady along the street looks after Jonathan when I’m out then sometimes I look after her children’. Other girls imagined their own mothers looking after their children for them:
…. When I am about 28, I will get a job and let my mother look after my child…
I would like to knit and sew things for my children and husband… I would like to
go abroad in the summer for my holidays, sometimes take my mother.
In the following extract, a girl imagines herself with twin daughters and describes her
mother helping to care for her children:

my job is a child’s governess and when I am not with my children my mother
is always ready to come and nurse them. I have a five day week. I have all
afternoons off. My mother lives three doors away with my father. … I do my
housework in the afternoons and spend a thoroughly happy life at 25 years old.

The imagined commitment of mothers described in this example could be interpreted
as examples of children’s worldviews and how they understood their own lives.
Joseph’s essays collected in 1956 also report closeness between family members:
47% of the 600 girls imagined they ‘lived with their children or close by so that they
lives revolved around their children and grandchildren’ (Joseph, 1961 p182).

Other girls described paying for childcare and domestic help. The following example
includes very specific details of everyday life and work for a girl who imagines she
will be a teacher, but in a rural-idyllic setting (the rural idyll was a recurrent theme in
around a fifth of the essays, but is not discussed here).

I am now 25 and my job is as a teacher. I do not have many children in my
class as it is in the country, and there are not many children there. I live on
Applegate farm with my husband, Mary and Paul, (my two children). Mary is
four and Paul is three. Early in the morning I check that the babysitter and the
charlady are coming then my husband drives me to work, which is five miles
away.

I teach a class of 10-11 year olds and they respect me and I find no
reason to punish them. At three thirty school ends and I wait till four o'clock
when my husband collects me. When I get home I pay the ladies and get the
tea ready. My husband (John) has a hot meal while the children and I have just
bread and butter and cakes During tea my husband tells me about the farm.

After tea I let the children play till 5.45pm, then they come in and
watch “The Magic Roundabout” and then go to bed after a glass of hot milk
and a “bikkie”. I flop down exhausted in the armchair and watch the news
Later in the evening I do some washing and ironing. At about 8 o'clock John
and I see the money situation and write cheques to pay the bills. By 8 30 we
have finished and I take my red pen and mark the tidy books of class 1. A little
later I go to bed as John has to get up at five a.m. to feed the chicks, milk the
cows and do all the other farm jobs
In the following example, the author imagines how she will have no time for a job, because of children, but imagines herself planning to return to work when children start at school:

I am 25 years old and I’m married and have two children whose ages are one and five. Every morning, I make the breakfast and send my five year old child off to school. Then I have the task of looking after my other child, and this is quite difficult, because he is rather mischievous. When the morning is over the shopping has to be done. I usually take my child with me unless I can get him minded by a neighbour or friend. We normally go to a supermarket, for I find this easier and quicker. When I say my child is mischievous I mean it, because when I take him into a supermarket he goes perfectly wild and grabs anything he can get his hands on to which is usually tin foods. .... When my child of one is five, I am going to work and earn a bit more money to buy more food and more clothes for myself. Altogether my life is completely full up and I have no time to get bored, and I fully enjoy my life.

This example also demonstrates a complex and nuanced awareness of the ebb and flow of family life, with an awareness of time passing and the dynamic processes involved in bringing up children, as she projects herself even further into the future,imagining returning to work “when my child of one is five”.

A small number of essays are written in a distinctive style, as a story, and convey the trials and tribulations of managing work and childcare, very vividly and in a good-humoured and entertaining way. In the following extract, a girl imagines herself as a teacher, and describes the morning routine in her household. The skilful use of brief bursts of direct speech adds to the drama and sense of rushing here:

“Oh no, time to get up.” “Blow, I’ve got to get up get the breakfast ready, light the fire, get the children to school.” Knock! Knock! oh no that must be the postman but he comes at 8.15 I must have overslept!” “Peter wake up!” “What’s that, dear?” “Never mind, just get up and light the fire.” “I’ll get the children dressed.” Five minutes later .... Come on “Rachel, please hurry up and put your other sock on.” “Isabel, don’t play with teddy just now.” “But Mummy.” “Now you girls please make it snappy and have a wash.” “Yes Mummy.” “And don’t forget to wash behind your ears!” “Peter we’ve run out of matches I’ll have to have the electric stove on.” “Yes dear.” “Breakfast ready hurry you two!” “Now coming.” “There now look at the time 8.50 run to school.”

Nostalgia for lost childhoods
It is in the context of detailed descriptions of domestic work that two girls expressed nostalgia for the childhoods they imagine they have moved out of and left behind (but
were, of course, experiencing at the time when they wrote the essay). In the following extract, a girl imagines not wanting to forget her younger life, and harks back to her childhood, in a positive way, describing the excitement of preparing for birthday parties:

I am now 25 years old and I am married. I have one child and he is 1 year old. I like knitting jumpers for him, and like going into town to buy new things… At night time I go upstairs to be with my son and tell him a story before he goes to sleep… My son’s name is Jonathan and he is the model of his father. Sometimes my mother and father come to see us and usually bring Jonathan some sweets. When my mother and father come they look after Jonathan while I go into town to do some shopping. … Tomorrow it will be Jonathan’s second birthday, he was very excited and I get excited too when I get the food ready for the party. I often wish I were just a little girl again, but I say to myself you’ve got to grow up sometimes… (emphasis added)

Most of the children’s accounts can be interpreted as optimistic. However, one exception is the following vivid narrative that graphically described the interruptions women experience when undertaking domestic tasks (in this case the washing). At the end of the essay, the expression of nostalgia stands out:

There was a pile of washing waiting to be done in the laundry basket waiting for me to wash. Oh how I wish I was young I thought to myself. Just as I had the water in the washer I heard my five month old baby crying in her pram outside. It was her bottle time I have to leave every thing to get her bottle ready. As soon as I had fed her, my husband came home for his dinner. It had to be a ham sandwich today so I could get my washing done quicker. After dinner I started to do my washing again and managed to do most of my washing when a neighbour came for a cup of tea I felt like a cup my self so I made a cup for us. When the neighbour went I finished my washing. When I went up to make the beds I saw pile of washing on the bedroom chair I had just put the [illegible fiche] away so I was very annoyed and picked up the [illegible fiche] The washing will have to wait until tomorrow I said to myself because the tea was still have to be done Soon we were sitting down to tea eating a cooked meal. After tea the day was not over there was the baby to put to bed and be bathed. There was also the washing to be ironed and many more things to be [illegible fiche] about twelve we went to bed. In the morning [it] was work all over again Oh I do wish I was still a school girl again, I thought to myself, but it never came true. (Emphasis added).

Unlike the majority of the other examples, which explicitly use an active ‘voice’ - stating “I do” this, “I will do” this, or occasionally and, perhaps more tentatively, “I would do” this, this girl presents herself passively, and does not seem to be in control of events. Tasks such as the washing waiting to be washed seem to control her.

Allison James describes girls reflecting ‘on the prospect of having children and the
effect this might have on their lives as grown women’ (James 2005 p257). This last example is unusual because domestic work is described vividly and somewhat negatively. Steedman (1982) interpreted the 8 year olds girls’ narratives in The Tidy House as demonstrating the burdensome business of childcare; but we are not so sure that the example given above demonstrates a negativity towards babies; rather, it seems to be a realistic image of the amount of work involved.

In most essays, domestic work is described in a matter-of-fact manner, : a part of everyday life, that has to be endlessly repeated. In some examples, the work related to childcare is constructed as a chore, but this contrasts with other examples where there is a theme of love and enjoyment, babies and children as a joy – as noted earlier, one girl wrote: “they greet me with smiles”. Anggard (2005) noted a preoccupation with everyday activities among girls’ narratives: ‘These are activities familiar to the girls themselves. It could be assumed that they used the narratives to shape some of their experiences’ (p546). However, she also notes that ‘the everyday activities that are accounted for are not the monotonous, dull ones, but pleasant activities connected with leisure time’ (p546). This is likely to reflect the nature of the task children were asked to do. The NCDS essays, produced by older children than those in Anggard’s study, seem to reflect a down-to-earth preoccupation with everyday life. In many of the examples provided above they also demonstrate the children’s skills in using detailed understanding of the routines of daily living to accomplish the task set by the researchers to ‘Imagine your life at 25’.

**Discussion**

What does this exercise tell us? By asking children to write relatively freely, we glean an insight into children’s experiences at the time, as well as their ideas about the future. The essays provide an intriguing glimpse into a time past, and appear to be products of modernity, rather than late modernity, with their descriptions of structured everyday lives, close family ties, local connections, and a heightened sense of realism that appears to look inward, rather than outwards to an increasingly globalised world (though this may be an artefact of the essays selected for analysis here; a few essays describe moon landings and space travel). Generally speaking, the essays seem to provide optimistic and positive accounts; they are highly gendered accounts. We can, to an extent, see them as explorations of traditional female positions, but at the same
time, it is important to acknowledge the active way in which girls position themselves in family life. A (perhaps) surprisingly large number of girls foresaw themselves combining work and childcare, and wrote about the arrangements they envisage for managing this in detail – revealing extensive awareness about everyday life for mothers of young children, presumably based upon their experiences and knowledge, especially about babies, and observations of their mothers and parents, as Prendergast and Prout (1980) and Steedman (1982) suggested. However, we should understand this in the context of two factors. Firstly, as noted, 61% (n=8411) of mothers in the overall NCDS sample reported being in work at some time since their child was aged 7. Secondly, the children were likely to already be responsible for domestic tasks at home, many reported that they helped at home, and one girl wrote “my children help me”, suggesting the idea of children as contributors (though logically, their imagined children would have been too young to do this when the essay writer was 25). This is also reflected in the quantitative data, and therefore the inclusion in the essays of domestic chores is indicative of the way that children used their current experiences to inform what they wrote about. It is possible that this generation of children were the last to take on responsibility for domestic tasks on such a scale, though in the late 1980s, many children described their contributions to the domestic economy (Morrow 1996); it may also be the case that we no longer ask children to describe domestic work because it has been rendered invisible under prevailing assumptions about children as dependents, as their ‘work’ is now constructed as ‘school work’ (Qvortrup, 1995).

To conclude, one of the most striking features of the essays is that, despite the very cursory instructions given to children about which aspects of their imagined lives at 25 they should describe - ‘the life you are leading, your interests, your home life and your work’, there was such heterogeneity and creativity in the way they approached the task, and the type of material that they included. The extracts from the essays show that children, at least in 1969, had a strong sense of themselves as ‘becoming’. They also drew on their own experiences of their daily lives in order to imagine themselves in the future. Some girls reflect backwards as well as forwards through time, and reveal a realistic understanding that being a mother and a housewife was a complex process that involved leaving childhood firmly, and sometimes regretfully, behind. Asking children to narrate their imagined futures enhances our understanding
of childhood, and suggests that the inevitable focus on children’s futures could be balanced with attention not only to children’s present lives, but also their past experiences and memories. A question begging to be answered, of course, is how 11 year olds today might imagine themselves at 25 years old. In terms of gendered expectations and identities, it would be fascinating to ask.

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i The NCDS started out as the ‘Perinatal Mortality Survey’ with over 17,000 children in the birth cohort. Follow-up has occurred as funding permitted, at ages 7, 11, 16, 23, 33, 42, 46, 50 and 55 years. In childhood, information came from interviews with parents and teachers, while the children themselves underwent medical and educational tests. Adult sweeps have collected data over a number of domains, including physical and mental health, demographic circumstances, employment, and housing. Further information about the study and access to the data is available via www.cle.ioe.ac.uk.

ii Social historians are increasingly using children’s writing as a resource, see Barron & Langhamer, 2017a, Pooley, 2015, & Pooley, forthcoming.

iii Copies of the original handwritten essays were stored on microfiche and archived at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (based at the Institute of Education, University of London). For many years these essays were not fully coded or analysed. Only some preliminary coding of the occupational aspirations of cohort members was carried out and archived together with the other quantitative data collected at age 11. During the 1970s, some analysis of a sub-sample of the essays was carried out on the ‘syntactic maturity’ of the children (see, for example, Richardson et al. 1976). More recently a project has been undertaken to transcribe and archive all of the essays to make them available for analysis using machine learning approaches (http://stage.ninjasforhire.co.za/cls/cls_research/does-the-language-of-11-year-olds-predict-their-future/).

iv Questions arose when applying for research ethics approval from the Institute of Education REC about the rationale for adding the open essay question to the questionnaire. Discussion with researchers involved in the original survey in 1969 (Professors Ron Davie and Peter Wedge) suggests that there were no specific or immediate plans to analyse the essays. Asking the cohort children to write essays was seen as an efficient way to collect data, as it did not require design, piloting or printing a questionnaire: the research team ‘wanted to do something to go beyond the numbers and find out something more personal about each child as an individual’ (personal communication, Ron Davie). At the time, the priority was to analyse the rich quantitative data collected in this sweep. In the late 1960s it was hoped that the NCDS would continue to follow the cohort members and study their development through into adulthood. With this in mind, the qualitative information about future aspirations, collected in the essays written at age 11, was seen as having potential interest in the future for comparison with the actual trajectories of individual cohort members. Thus, the ethics of asking the children to write about their imagined futures were not considered. This is not intended as a criticism, but reflects how children were conceptualized in research terms at the time, as the ‘objects’ of scientific study. Individual schools were left to decide whether it was appropriate to ask for parents’ permission
before administering the tests. Children’s consent was not asked for, and by today’s standards, this is discomforting to say the least (Alderson 1998). On the other hand, the essays constitute a rich resource of material and warrant and deserve fuller analysis.