

## Conceptual, Methodological and Ethical Issues in Researching Children's Experience

### PART ONE

# 1

## Researching Children's Experience: Methods and Methodological Issues

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### Why Research Children's Experience?

As one looks from an historical perspective at the vast field of social scientific, empirical research already conducted on and with children, it is evident that the predominant emphasis has been on children as the objects of research rather than children as subjects, on child-related outcomes rather than on child-related processes and on child variables rather than children as persons.

The chapters by Hogan, and by Christensen and Prout in this book (Chapters 2 and 3 respectively) outline the assumptions held by psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists about children that shaped the approach taken by these disciplines for much of the twentieth century. Both chapters also describe the shift in emphasis and ideology which has become known as 'the new social studies of childhood'. As Hogan outlines, similar critiques of the dominant perspective on child development research have become evident amongst psychologists, although mainstream developmental psychology tends to be somewhat more wedded to traditional epistemologies than appears to be the case amongst contemporary sociologists and anthropologists, or indeed, other disciplines like geography and history (Holloway & Valentine, 2000).

This chapter is written by two people with different disciplinary backgrounds – developmental and clinical psychology (Greene) and social work and social research (Hill). Despite this difference in background and perspective, we share an interest in conducting research that helps us to understand more about children's experience of their worlds. This is not an easy task: there are many questions and pitfalls that can trouble the researcher in this area.

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The impetus to set out to understand and describe children's experience may reflect one or more of a range of different commitments as a researcher. First, it may reflect an interest in experience itself. According to William James, 'individual experience defines the scope of psychology' (1990 [1890]: 361). Yet very few psychologists these days would agree with James on the centrality of experience. In fact, the idea that individual experience is central to psychology has come under siege from many quarters. For example, it does not accord with the desire on the part of twentieth-century mainstream psychology to identify itself as a science, in the very traditional sense of that term.

From the sociological perspective, experience, as a term, has been one that is relegated to the realm of the psychological. It is a phenomenon that does not fit with the sociological emphasis on social forces and factors as the causes of human activity (Giddens, 1989). Susan Oyama (1993) points out that both sociology and anthropology fought for a long time to replace psychological determinism with sociocultural determinism – although it must be said that this has been modified by the recent emphasis on the part of Giddens and others on the importance of individual agency. In fact, with a few exceptions, such as psychoanalysis, many contemporary psychologists eschew 'psychological' explanations, feeling much more comfortable with biological determinism than psychological determinism. However, both sociocultural determinism and biological determinism avoid the psychological and serve to obliterate the person as agent and as experiencing subject.

Recent movements, such as social constructionism, the social scientific wing of postmodernism, have also played their part in undermining any claim that we can or should place experience at the centre of our interests. Where there is an attack on the notion of the unitary self, an attack on the notion of individual experience cannot be far behind. If there is no self, who is the experienter?

On the other hand, one might well argue that the nature of children's experience is of great interest to social science. It is, for example, very open to a developmental analysis. When do children begin to recognize that they have an internal representation of the world, which is private to them? Do young children experience their worlds via pictures, feelings or words? How do adults assist and shape the experiential life of young children? The active role that children play in constructing their own developmental story is increasingly recognized and calls out for a methodology that assists us in accessing and understanding children's experiential life.

Jerome Kagan has commented that, 'The person's interpretation of experience is simultaneously the most significant product of an encounter and the spur to the next' (1984: 279). It can be argued that without some kind of access to the content of a person's experience, we have a very incomplete account, from a scientific perspective, of what it is that causes any person, adult or child, to act as they do.

Second, aside from an interest in experience itself, research into children's experience can reflect an interest in the study of children as persons rather than study of the child that is carried out in order to advance our understanding

of human psychology in general. Studying children as persons implies a view of children as sentient beings who can act with intention and as agents in their own lives. An interest in researching children's experience can, therefore, be allied to a moral perspective on the role and status of children which respects and promotes their entitlement to being considered as persons of value and persons with rights. The focus shifts thereby to studying children not child variables. The child as an experiencing subject is a person whose experience and whose response to that experience are of interest to themselves, to other children and to adults. In Chapter 3 of this volume, Christensen and Prout talk about conferring on children and childhood 'a sense of present value'. Children in most societies are valued for their potential and for what they will grow up to be but are devalued in terms of their present perspectives and experiences.

The researcher who values children's perspectives and wishes to understand their lived experience will be motivated to find out more about how children understand and interpret, negotiate and feel about their daily lives. If we accept a view of children as persons, the nature of children's experiential life becomes of central interest.

In recent years, children's right to be considered as persons has been voiced publicly in a number of different fora. Vindication of this right underpins the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Children Act (1989) in the UK and The National Children's Strategy (2000) in Ireland. The seeds were sown for the recognition of children's right to be heard in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of social upheaval in the West when the voices of marginalized groups such as women and ethnic minorities surfaced and changed the political landscape. An interest in children as marginalized people could be seen as part of this larger movement. Within the social sciences, a new interest in children's experience and perspectives was fueled by the alignment of researchers with this moral and political perspective on children's position in the world (see for example, Qvortrup, Bordy, Sgitha, & Wintersberger, 1994). Furthermore the demand on the part of policy makers and practitioners to have ways of accessing the child's perspective and giving voice to children has also led to a pragmatic interest among researchers in the development of appropriate methods (Davie, 1993; Davie, Upton, & Varma, 1996).

Third, researching children's experience is premised on the view that children are not all the same. It resists the idea that what we are setting out to research is 'the child' and replaces this piece of automatic discourse – very central to the practice of developmental psychology in particular – with the recognition that children encounter their worlds in an individual and idiosyncratic manner and that their worlds are themselves all different. The longstanding lack of recognition of one major distinction, that of gender, led Ennew to comment on the existence of 'that strange ungendered isolate, the child' (Ennew, 1994). Clearly numerous other distinctions also apply. Setting out to research children's experience implies a respect for each child as a unique and valued experiencer of his or her world. It also demands the use of methods that can capture the nature of children's lives as lived rather

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than those that rely on taking children out of their every day lives into a professional's office or into a 'lab'.

Recognition of children's diversity and individuality has implications for research methodology. Developmental psychology has had and continues to have a fascination with statistics and with attempting to draw conclusions about 'the child' by combining measures of some particular behaviour of a large group of children. In an interesting review of a book by Cairns, Bergman and Kagan, *Methods and models for studying the individual* (1998), Ingrid Josephs repeats the guiding question for the eleven chapters of the book. 'How can the richness of individual lives be captured by the objective methods and statistical analyses of developmental research?' After reviewing the book, Josephs concludes, 'the answer is simple "It cannot be captured at all!"' (p. 475). Perhaps there is an unresolvable struggle between the desire for so-called objectivity and the wish to understand children and how they lead their lives.

We both subscribe to the view that the understanding of children, their lives and their development requires a multiplicity of methodological approaches. The method selected should fit the question that is asked. If the focus of enquiry is on the quality of individual lives, statistical methods are not the method of choice since statistics serve to obliterate individuality and richness. The richness of an individual's life is very often not to be found in the surface of life but in how it is lived, in the person's experience and reactions to the world. On the other hand, if we want to know how many children in a particular population have experienced the death of a parent we must collect the appropriate statistics.

### What is Meant by 'Experience'?

At this point it might be useful to ask what one means when one uses the word 'experience'. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* gives various definitions of experience. The most relevant from our perspective is perhaps the definition of experience as, 'The fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition or of being consciously affected by an event. Also an instance of this.' By this definition, consciousness is a requisite for experience. The definition implies that those who experience are conscious of being the subject of a state/condition or the effects of an event. By this token, one might ask whether pre-verbal children can be said with confidence to have experiences since they cannot report on them in a self-conscious manner. That a young child has experiences of the world is an inference, which we make when and if we attribute consciousness to infants. This becomes relevant to the researcher who claims an interest in researching the experience of infants and young children via observation.

Sociocultural perspectives on the construction of self suggest persuasively that how we relate to the world is very largely a function of the cultural context, particularly, those discourses which are central to structuring the world and the individual's place in it. Thus, children come to think of themselves

as selves and interpret their encounters with self, the world and others in very different ways depending on the discourses that are dominant in their culture. Schefflin and Ochs (1998) describe the radically different attributions made by the Kaluli people in Papua New Guinea and the US and British middle classes about how infants relate to the world and how they should be treated. The Kaluli people assume that babies 'have no understanding' and do not address them or treat them as communicative partners. By contrast, in the middle-class homes of the USA and Britain 'from birth on, the infant is treated as a social being and as an addressee in social interaction' (p. 51). Whereas in many western cultures parents spend a lot of time interpreting the baby's behaviour and their underlying mood states, preferences, and so on, the Kaluli people show 'a cultural dispreference for talking about or making claims about what another might think, what another might do, or what another is about to do, especially if there is no external evidence' (p. 56). Thus the child is socialized into a mode of relating to her/himself and others that is very specific to his or her culture. The interest that we show in some parts of the West in the inner experience of others, even of babies, is not a universal phenomenon. Interest in, and interpretation of, experience is also likely to vary in important ways from culture to culture. How we value and speak about experience is, then, in large part, a function of a culturally specific process.

In western cultures the observer of children tends to assume that their activity and verbalizations are products of, or in some essential way connected to, the child's experience. However, the nature of any child's (or adult's) experience is always in part inaccessible to an outsider: this must be a fundamental premise for the researcher. This inaccessibility is even more problematic when children are as yet unable to report on their conscious encounters with the world. We will leave aside for the moment the capacity of even very young children to deceive.

The inaccessibility of experience might be assumed to be total if experience is seen as essentially private. However most contemporary understandings of experience, since the time of John Dewey at least, would see experience as socially mediated and therefore, in some essentials, shared. Experience is interpretative and the medium by which humans interpret their encounters with the world is linguistic or at least symbolic. From a discourse theory perspective, our experience is constituted by the discourses that are available to us (see, for example, Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984). While recognizing the importance of discourse in creating meaning, to conclude that experience is entirely constituted by discourse is going a step too far since it negates the material and sensational foundation of some forms of experience, for example, the abscess that causes a pain in one's jaw.

Experience is about interpretation, on the part of the self to the self (as in reflexive mental processes) and on the part of the self to others (as in attempts to communicate experience) and, further, on the part of the others as they attempt to understand the original experience. The latter exchange has been encompassed in the term 'intersubjectivity', that process which

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occurs in exchange between two or more subjectivities. This dialectic process applies not only to the development of meaning in children's daily lives, but also to the encounters by which researchers seek to understand children's experiences.

Researching children's experience is a project that is fundamentally problematic. The process is highly inferential. We assume that it is possible to learn about children's experience *both* by enquiry into their active engagement with their material and social worlds, whether the focus is on actions or words, *and* from their own reports on their subjective world. Thus, observational studies may give us an entrée into children's experience if they show us the ways in which children make efforts to understand and negotiate their worlds.

Kagan notes that, 'The problem psychologists have been unable to solve is how to diagnose these interpretations (children's interpretations) from the actions, statements and undetected physiological reactions of children' (1984: 279). This is an ongoing issue which will remain a problem for researchers in this area but it is a problem which is intrinsic to the nature of the questions which we are asking.

### **Researching Experience: Some Further Limitations on What can be Known**

The researcher who sets out to research experience needs not only to be aware of the limitations on his or her capacity to access the experience of another person, but also the limits of what a focus on experience can tell us about the other.

It is salutary perhaps to look at the interest in experience that characterized a certain phase of research into the psychology of women. Because women's experience had been so blatantly disregarded by the social sciences, one of the first goals of feminist researchers was to find a central place for women's accounts of their own experiences of their lives. Feminist research was also in the main committed to the view that each woman's experience was different and that each woman's experience deserved to be heard. There are many resonances in the history of feminist research with the kind of rhetoric that is produced around children, rather more recently. One might accuse such researchers of valorizing experience beyond other sources of information on human life.

Much of the early feminist work appeared to be premised on the view that the woman herself has a special knowledge about the self. The work of Freud, among others, must lead us to radically question that assumption. Most psychologists accept that we may not have access to all our feelings and motivations at all times. Mechanisms such as denial and dissociation result in the 'forgetting' of events and thoughts that have been experienced. People can report on their motivations and emotions only to the extent that they are aware of them and only in the manner they come to interpret them.

People are prone also to all sorts of biases in reporting their views and experiences to others. Psychometricians have spelled out the effect of unconscious response biases on the way in which people respond to surveys. For instance, the impulse to present oneself in a way that is socially acceptable to others (social desirability) can influence answers to direct questions and is likely to remain a significant factor even in extended qualitative encounters with a researcher. People can also set out deliberately to lie and deceive. Children are not exempt from any of these processes.

Accordingly, even where our focus is on the understanding of one human being's actions and motivations, his or her account of his or her own experience should be seen as but one source of information, one which may be valid as an experience but suspect as a source of complete understanding. To quote Kagan again:

When a mother, who has just struck a child with the heavy, blunt end of a chopping block explains with sincerity to an observer that she loves her child and is only trying to make sure that her daughter learns to control her strong will, we must reflect on that subjective interpretation – but we do not have to accept it in our objectively framed explanation. (1984: 278)

Kagan contrasts the subjective frame with the objective frame, two positions that the researcher can adopt, both having a contribution to make to our knowledge. There are ways other than Kagan's of characterizing sources of information, but what is important is that we acknowledge the strengths and limitations of each source, that we do not, for example use a child's account of her reactions to a particular event as the beginning and end of our understanding of her reaction. When parents and children give differing accounts of the same events or relationships, as they often do, (Sweeting, 2001; Triseliotis, Borland, Hill, & Lambert, 1995), the researcher needs to present these as complementary perspectives and not to seek a single version of the 'truth'.

Given all these caveats we might ask, 'Can research access experience?' As Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers state, 'there is no device for inquiring the child which can tell us what the child is like' (1992, p. 17). Elsewhere in this book Annie Rogers comments, 'The very notion that we might know what is in a child's head is ridiculous' (p. 000). Ultimately we would agree with these statements but believe that we can and should aim towards an increased level of understanding, albeit a partial understanding, of children's experience and the ways in which they process it, mentally, physically and behaviorally.

The subjectivity of the researcher adds a further layer of complexity to the research process. William James suggests that 'we begin our study with our own experience since other experiences can be intelligible only in these terms' (1990 [1890], p. 361). Despite the fact that James wrote in this way so many years ago it is only comparatively recently that researchers have become alert once more to the extent of their own involvement with the research process. In the social sciences, this awareness was triggered in the wake of the realization by natural scientists of the impossibility of direct

perception of physical events. The lens of the observer or researcher inevitably distorts. Many social scientists, but not all, would accept that the objective researcher is a myth and that it is essential for researchers to scrutinize and take account of their own position as an enquirer. Reflexivity is therefore an essential element in any research (Davis, Watson, & Cunningham-Burley, 2000). As we set out to research children's experiences we must add analysis of this extra layer of interpretation to the interpretation that is at the heart of experience itself. As adults we bring to our encounters with children a particular package of attitudes and feelings, constructed through our own personal childhood history and our contemporary perspective on childhood, often coloured by one or more of the various prevailing ideologies of childhood.

### **Researching Children's Experience: What is Different about Children?**

As we have attempted to argue, there are a number of difficulties that beset the researcher who embraces the aim of researching a person's experience. Are there particular difficulties and challenges in relation to researching children's experience? Some social scientists, particularly those who have identified with 'The new sociology (or social studies) of childhood' have argued strongly that there is no need for a specific set of methods to research children's lives (Christensen & James, 2000). Sociologists are critical of developmental psychology's tendency to see children as less than adult and as people in the making rather than as competent and complete social actors.

We would agree that researchers should not take for granted any adult-child distinction. The questioning of taken for granted assumptions about children and childhood is central to this book and to the project of enquiring into children's own perspectives on, and experience of, their worlds. However, we would suggest that the researcher must be open to the use of methods that are suited to children's level of understanding, knowledge, interests and particular location in the social world. In their discussion of children's role in research and the methods used to research their experience, Hogan, Etz, and Tudge (1999) ask 'how information can be obtained from children in developmentally appropriate ways' This question cannot be disregarded: infants, young children and teenagers cannot be treated identically. The question of developmental differences in level of ability or understanding must arise. It is palpably ridiculous to claim that an infant has the same kind of understanding of the world as does a teenager. For example, infants and very young children cannot understand complex and/or abstract questions so it is therefore essential for the researcher to adjust their mode of enquiry accordingly.

But we need to keep open all the time our views on what 'developmentally appropriate' might mean in any particular context with any group of children. The simple equation of age with a particular level of ability or knowledge or set of attitudes should be avoided. It is easy for adults to underestimate children's abilities and to patronize them. Such attitudes to

children have undoubtedly been a feature of past research endeavors. It is also the case that researchers have tended to use age in a way that disregards the wide diversity of ability and interests that can be found in any group of children of the same chronological age. At the same time, age is a powerful social marker in our society and we adults very often ensure that children go through the same kind of experience simply because they have reached a particular age (Greene, 2003). Thus, 5-year-olds in the UK will typically experience the transition to formal schooling in unison. Similarly, all 13-year-olds in Ireland will be expected to make the transition to secondary school. Other countries have different ideas about what happens at what age, but the importance of age is central in the patterning of children's life courses.

We would endorse the view that in many ways children behave and think in ways that are very similar to adults. It is important, however, not to essentialize either the differences or the similarities which research might reveal, since any set of findings is very often a function of local or historical demands and discourses and may not have any significance at another time or in another place.

Children, like adults, may be very open to the demand characteristics of the research setting and the nature of the relationship between themselves and the researcher or interrogator. An interview is a social exchange in which the social demands may outweigh the ostensible demands of the interview itself. Thus, children may give answers that are determined more by their desire to please than their desire to be truthful. Children behave in different ways in different settings so the choice of where to carry out research is as important as how to carry it out (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Studies have shown that children will often answer very odd questions posed to them by adults. Hughes and Grieve (1980) asked children questions such as, 'Is red heavier than yellow?' and, 'One day there were two flies crawling up a wall. Which fly got to the top first?' They found that almost all children gave answers to the questions. In a follow-up study, Waterman, Blades, and Spencer (2001) asked five to 8-year-old children a series of nonsensical questions in closed and open format and found that children were much more likely to try to give answers to closed format questions, that is, those requiring a yes or no response. These researchers suggest that children will very often answer no when they do not understand a question. Seventy six percent of children gave an inappropriate yes or no answer to a nonsense question compared to 20 percent of adults. Waterman et al. suggest that interviewers should be very cautious about how they interpret children's answers to closed questions and that they 'should use open questions as much as possible'. (p. 477). Such caveats also extend to questionnaire and test responses. To a significant extent, children are used to being directed by adults and to doing either what they are told or what adults seem to expect of them, however baffling.

The question arises, then, whether children are particularly suggestible, that is, more suggestible than adults. Children's suggestibility had been analyzed by a number of researchers, particularly those with an interest in

children's reliability as witnesses in a legal setting (Spencer & Flin, 1991). Ceci, Ross, and Toglia (1987) found that children are more likely to take on board incorrect information supplied by an adult than that supplied by a child. On the other hand, it appears that there is very little difference between adults and children as regards memory loss and recall and both are helped by recognition aids (Spencer & Flin, 1991). So children are not necessarily less reliable informants than adults.

Are children less tolerant of ambiguity in language? It has been convincingly demonstrated that our language is permeated with metaphor (Gibbs, 1994). Children may show a lack of understanding of conventional metaphors frequently used by adults but equally they have a capacity to invent their own metaphorical expressions. In relation to the former, one of our research colleagues was surprised when a young child answered her question, which was one of a sequence of questions in the area of family relationships, as follows:

Q How close are you to your grandfather?

A Well, not very close really: I live in Dublin and he lives in Offaly.

This is not to say that children do not make use of metaphor in their speech. Indeed adults may often fail to understand the idiosyncratic and creative use of language that children can employ. A Finnish study of young people's text messaging revealed their high level of linguistic inventiveness, resulting in communication that was often obscure to uninitiated adults (Kaseniemi, 2001).

A question which arises when attempting to access children's experience is how one tells the difference between a child's recounting of an experience which actually happened to him or her and telling an imaginative tale concocted either to amuse or fascinate the researcher or to mislead. One might answer that it does not really matter but, again, whether it matters or not will depend upon the nature of the research question. Children start to tell lies at a young age. Studies reported by Lewis, Stanger and Sullivan (1989) show just how effectively many 3-year-olds lie about a minor transgression and how difficult it was for adults to detect whether or not they were lying from their facial expression and demeanor.

One major difference between the adult-adult research relationship and the adult-child research relationship relates to power (Alderson, 1995), although it must be noted that this is a quantitative difference since the power differential operates for adults also. Mayall argues that the subordinate position of children cannot be ignored and must be taken into account by the researcher (Mayall, 2000). Adults typically have authority over children and children often find it difficult to dissent, disagree or say things which they think may be unacceptable. Children may have difficulty in believing that any adult will take their views seriously if their daily experience of adults dictates otherwise (Cloke, 1995). At the same time children are adept at undermining the power of adults by such tactics as resistance, subversion and subterfuge. As Harris (1998) points out, children learn very early

on that they are part of a 'kids versus grown-ups' dynamic. Corsaro (1997) describes the strategies by which nursery school children, aged 3 to 5, 'mock and evade adult authority'. The researcher needs to be aware in every new context about the meaning that being asked questions by strange adults has for this child or this group of children. Have they learned to give careful, 'scripted' answers? Have their lives changed in negative ways as the result of answering adults' questions? As discussed below in relation to children's involvement in the construction of the research process, researchers may be advised to think about ways of giving up some of their power in the research situation by, for example, allowing the children to choose the time and place of interviews.

In some cases it seems to be possible for adults to convince children that they are, as adults go, pretty powerless. In the course of Emond's long sojourn with young people in a residential group home (described in Chapter 7 of this volume) it became clear to her fellow residents that being a doctoral student was not too much fun and she reports being seen eventually as 'an object of pity rather than a threat'.

It is clear that the characteristics of the researcher matter. We disagree with the view, still apparently fostered in some schools of thought, that researchers can be like flies on the wall or in some way neutralize themselves. The extent to which researchers need to be like their child subjects or participant is an issue, however. Researchers, especially ethnographers and anthropologists, have long debated how far it is necessary to adopt special tactics to allow them to enter the 'separate worlds' of children and young people (see, for example, Corsaro, 1985, on 'peer culture'). At an extreme, this perspective on children's worlds implies that children occupy different worlds to adults and that adults can never hope to understand the world of children. One response to this view is not to try and another is to become like children. The former seems to be an unnecessarily gloomy and probably invalid conclusion and the second unwise and doomed to failure. Our view would be that children would generally be quick to detect any contrivances that an adult may adopt to be more like them. There are, however, examples in the literature of researchers who have successfully negotiated a space somewhere between adult figures of authority and the children themselves (Christensen, 2004). Barrie Thorne describes how she attempted to negotiate a role as 'least adult', somewhere between the children she observed and their adult authority figures, and how complicated such a negotiation must be. Her chapter, 'Learning from kids' in *Gender Play* (1993) stands as a very thoughtful reflection on the relationship of the researcher to the children whom they engage in research. A further matter about which there can be little dispute is the importance of being familiar with the 'local cultural practices of communication' used by the children and young people involved in the research (Christensen & James, 2000: 7). This extends to establishing a familiarity with children's routines, timetables and expectations.

Finally we wish to touch briefly on children's role in research. We assume that children are actively engaged in making sense of the research process once they are engaged in it and that this effort after social understanding is

present even in very young children (Dunn, 1988). In this sense it is always appropriate to see children as participants in the research process. Researchers' terminology has changed in recent years in line with the view that the people who are the focus of research are participants not subjects (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). The extent of children's participation in the research process can vary beyond this basic level. One of us (Hill) discusses ethical issues surrounding consent and involvement in research in Chapter 4 of this volume. From the perspective of methodology, it is still the case that most of the research carried out into children's experience of their worlds is prompted, designed, analysed and disseminated by adults. Involving children in research design and data handling is unusual but a number of researchers are beginning to explore when and how this can be done (Alderson, 2000; Hill, 1997 and see Veale, Chapter 14 of this volume). Interesting examples of how children can be more fully drawn into the design and analysis of research are beginning to emerge in the literature. Children have been involved in advisory groups that work with researchers to identify appropriate methods and procedures for answering research questions (see, for example Edwards & Alldred, 1999; Emond, 2002), a practice which seems to hold a lot of potential. Checking back with child participants that the researcher's attempts at understanding make sense to them is also a very useful practice, which is in line with the goal of keeping faith with children's own perspective and voice. Some researchers have gone much further in assisting children in becoming involved to some extent at all stages of the research process (Emond, 2002). Ultimately, however, it is adults who control the world of publishing, policy making, the universities, the social services and so on, so children's independence and autonomy as researchers are fundamentally and intrinsically constrained.

### **Methods Suited to Researching Children's Experiences and Perspectives**

There is a long but not very influential tradition of research on children's experience and experiences of their worlds. We might start with research where children are the informants on their own lives. Margaret Mead provides an early example in her interviews of children as reported in conversations with children and young people in New Guinea and Samoa (1930; 1961). A further early example is the work of Charlotte Bühler (1930) and her use of diaries as a mode of accessing the experience of teenaged girls.

Over the twentieth century an immense range of different methods was developed and employed in research on and with children. This section focuses on methods that involve children themselves reporting on, or in some way revealing or displaying, their experience.

The approach to collecting data of this kind can be both qualitative and quantitative, or involve a mixture of both. Quantitative methods can be informative on children's experience but our emphasis here will be on qualitative methods

since they tend to be open-ended, narrative and holistic. They are more able to capture the full richness of experience whereas using numbers provides a means of summarizing some essential features of experience, as they relate to either single individuals or groups.

This is not to say that there is no place for measurement or statistics in researching children's experience (Alanen, 2003). Qvortrup (2000) argues, for example, that large-scale statistical surveys are important in capturing the diversity of childhood and of children's daily life experience. Such data may describe the parameters of experience but not the subjective content. Meaning and content can be accessed through standardized questionnaires, but in many ways use of such tools conflicts with the goal of arriving at an understanding of how children themselves construe and negotiate their worlds.

Some of the wide range of possible methods that can be useful in accessing children's experience are listed below. At this stage, there will be no attempt to describe or discuss methods in detail. Several of them are discussed in full in succeeding chapters and further information can be found in recent texts referenced in this book, such as that of Grieg and Taylor (1999).

### ***Observation***

The use of observation is discussed in two of the chapters in this volume: those of Dunn (Chapter 5) and Tudge and Hogan (Chapter 6: participant observation, as used by Emond is discussed in Chapter 7).

Observational methods can take a variety of forms. In terms of content, they can be naturalistic or contrived. The possibilities in terms of recording are even more various, involving paper and pencil, audio, video and filmed records. The data may include children's actions and children's verbalizations. Sampling methods also dictate what is recorded. For example, time sampling methods result in frequency counts, whereas event sampling typically produces descriptive narratives.

In relation to children's experience, the analysis and interpretation of observational records of behavior (including speech) require a level of inference beyond that which is required when the child is in some way reporting directly on his or her experience.

### ***Interviews – individual and group***

Interview methods are discussed and described in several chapters in this volume, (Wescott & Littleton (Chapter 8) Rogers (Chapter 9); Hennessy & Heary (Chapter 13)).

Interviews may involve single children with a single interviewer or groups of children responding to one or more interviewers, as in the focus group method. The interviewer may ask children standardized questions or allow the nature of the questions to flow with the conversation. Between a

totally prescribed set of questions and a totally unstructured exchange lies the more frequently occupied territory of the semi-structured interview. Within an interview setting, there is scope for the use of a variety of linked methods such as brainstorming on a theme or an object, or interspersing the question and answer format with pencil and paper or other tasks.

The possible data generated through interviews are rich and varied. Depending on the focus of the interview the data may extend from straightforward facts about the child's life to data which require a great deal of interpretation, perhaps guided by psychoanalytic or other depth psychologies. Interviewers need not be human! Measelle, Ablow, Cowan and Cowan, for example, have used puppets successfully as 'interviewers' of 4- to 7-year-old children (The Berkeley Puppet Interview, 1998).

### ***Creative methods***

Reference to the use of creative methods can be found in the chapters by Veale (Chapter 14) and by Rogers (Chapter 9) in this volume.

Creative methods are those that explicitly give reign to the child's imagination. They would include creative writing, such as telling or writing stories (as opposed to giving a factual account of one's past experiences), writing poems, drawing or painting, taking photographs, making videos or films and drama and role play (Christenson & James, 2000; Levin, 1995).

### ***Elicited self-reports and children's spontaneous narratives***

Self-report methods include those which rely on verbal reports but which involve children in writing or recording their views, feelings, and so on without direct and ongoing interaction with an interviewer. Other methods include asking children to respond to scenarios and vignettes, (see Barter & Renold, 2000, for an interesting discussion on the use of vignettes with children), questionnaires, sentence completion tasks, recording children's naturally occurring narratives and asking children to record their commentaries in diaries. Simple but effective verbal prompts such as asking children to tell or write down their 'three wishes' fall somewhere between this category and the interview category.

The analysis of autobiography and life stories represents a growing area of interest in social science research (for example, Josselson & Lieblich, 1993). Work with children is very much less common than work with adults and is represented in this book by the chapter by Engel (Chapter 11).

New forms of computing technology offer considerable scope for use in research. Children are often more familiar than adults with these media and can use them readily to communicate with others about their lives (Borland, Hill, Laybourn, & Stafford, 2001; Holloway & Valentine, 2001).

### ***Use of material props and visual prompts***

Under this heading, one might place mapping and graphical methods (such as ecomaps, life story charts, genograms), the use of dolls, puppets and other toys, games and using pictures, cartoons or photographs as triggers or prompts.

### ***Projective techniques***

These techniques rely on children's responses to ambiguous stimuli. Their responses are assumed to reveal their unconscious orientations and feelings. Examples include the Blacky Drawings and the Children's Thematic Apperception Test.

### ***Methods that can capture the ongoing interactions and transactions of children's lives***

Many of the methods listed above have been developed within the traditional positivist model of the child and how the child should be researched (Hogan et al., 1999). Contemporary perspectives on children's lives that characterize children as social actors and that place emphasis on seeing children as embedded in a rich sociocultural context demand methods that can address these conceptualizations. In many ways, our repertoire of methods is inadequate to the task. They speak to the isolated child in a fixed and universalized context.

Ethnographic methods can often be well suited to capturing the ongoing flow and complexities of children's daily lives (see Emond, Chapter 7 of this volume) Ethnographic approaches involve spending extended time with children in their everyday environments, such as a school or play space (Christensen, 2004; James, 1993; Moore, 1986). They often combine participant observation with key informant interviews, informal group discussions and creative exercises. For pre-school children an interesting mix of methods has been developed in the Mosaic Model (Clark & Moss, 2001).

All of the above methods generate data that may be recorded in a variety of different ways (audiotaped, videotaped, filmed, photographed, and written down contemporaneously or after the event). The potential of online recording and analysis is huge and varied (Holloway & Valentine, 2001). The data, however collected, must be analysed and here again a number of choices can be made depending on the focus of the study and the theoretical commitments of the researcher. For example, the discourse analyst would see all data sets as potential texts, which are open to discourse analysis (see Alldred & Burman, Chapter 10 of this volume).

## Choosing a Method

The choice of method or methods should depend on its appropriateness to the purpose and nature of the research. If the researcher's work is embedded in a particular theoretical framework, the choice of method may flow seamlessly from the researcher's prior commitments. So, for example, a commitment to discourse theory demands a focus on discourse analysis (see, for example, Chapter 10 by Allred & Burman in this volume). Phenomenological theorists use methods that have been developed by adherents of that theoretical viewpoint (see Chapter 12 by Danaher & Briod in this volume).

Although most researchers have a theoretical commitment of some kind, even if they choose not to make it very explicit, some methods are essentially pragmatic and do not connect either historically or logically to any one theoretical orientation. It is often argued, furthermore, that there is an advantage to using more than one method of data collection since this may provide the opportunity for triangulation of data (Brannen, 1992) and variety can in itself stimulate and maintain the interest of participants (Thomas & O'Kane, 2000). For example, Hill, Laybourn and Borland (1996) describe the use of a sequence of mixed methods geared to elicit children's feelings and perspectives on their own wellbeing. Woodhead (1999) used an eclectic but carefully chosen mix of quantitative and qualitative methods in his study of child workers in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the Phillipines and Central America. The methods making up his 'Children's Perspectives Protocol' include drawing, mapping, games and role-play as well as interviews. If the aim is to provide rich and comprehensive accounts of experience, some would say the more sources the better. For example, Garbarino and Stott state: 'The more sources of information an adult has about a child, the more likely that the adult is to receive the child's messages properly' (1992: 15).

Triangulation should not open the doors to an 'anything goes' approach to method choice. Even if method choice is not a direct consequence of theoretical perspective, there should be a clear rationale for choosing a particular method or selection of methods. It is also important to remain alert to some of the implications of promoting triangulation as a methodological doctrine rather than simply as a practice. Triangulation can imply that there is a reality to which one can come closer by combining multiple perspectives. Richardson (1994) questions 'the assumption that there is a "fixed point" or "object" that can be triangulated' (p. 522) and suggests that the metaphor of the crystal might be more useful than the metaphor of the triangle to the qualitative researcher. Each representation in research can be seen as a facet of a crystal, and crystals 'reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on the angle of our repose' (Richardson, 1994: 523). The researcher's epistemological theories and commitments will shape his or her choices throughout the research process and will fundamentally influence what claims the researcher makes.

It is not always possible to discover and take account of each individual child's preferences but there should be some awareness of the desirability of

matching child to method. Individual contacts with children are generally preferable for the private exploration of personal issues. Many children will be reluctant to share sensitive matters in a group, unless the groups consist of children who are in similar circumstances (for example, who are in residential care, whose parents have divorced). On the other hand, on some subjects, children seem to be fortified by the presence of others, and prefer to meet the strange researcher in the company of their supportive peers (Hood, Kelley & Mayall, 1996). Other group members may also stimulate memories and remind them of things they otherwise would not think to say. Differences in viewpoint can be discussed. (These and other issues relating to the use of focus groups in research with children are discussed by Hennessy and Heary in Chapter 13 of this volume). Children with different attributes will require different methods. The same children may behave quite differently when interviewed individually and when in focus groups and may give different types of answers to similar questions (Stanton, Aronson, Borgatti, Galbraith & Feigelman (1993). West and Mitchell (1998) found that 'lower status girls' who had been slow to reveal their views in a group setting were much more forthcoming in one-to-one interviews. Differences to do with their age, physical and mental ability, ethnicity and culture will all be crucial in determining the appropriateness of any method (see, for example, Stalker, 2002; Woodhead, 1999).

Time is an important and sometimes forgotten aspect of the research process. The research literature on children is replete with examples of what might be called snapshot or smash and grab approaches to collecting data. There are situations or research questions that will make such an approach desirable or necessary. We do not always have the resources that we would like to have in order to spend extended time with children. Given the consideration discussed above in terms of the child participant's need to understand what is going on in the research encounter or to establish trust in the researcher, even the one-stop research encounter should not be a rushed affair. However, giving time to research becomes a more important consideration if the research question is one that demands getting to know the child or the child getting to know the researcher. Emond (Chapter 7 of this volume) set out to find out what it was like living in a children's home. It was one of the young people who suggested to her that the only way to find out was to move into the children's home and find out how they live by becoming a resident. Living in the home for a year gave Emond insights into their way of life that would not have been possible at a distance or without such a major time commitment.

Prospective, longitudinal studies of children's daily lives and experience are rare but they offer great potential in capturing the dynamic and changing nature of life experience and place less reliance on children's inevitably selective memories of past events. Contact with children over time should not only be seen as justifiable in a developmental design since it is clear that time is sometimes needed for children to relax enough with a researcher to reveal their thoughts, feelings and concerns. Time and trust can go hand in hand, particularly with those children who have learned not to trust.

The choice of method or combination of methods should be made in the light of the need to establish the rigor and credibility of the research project. Choice of method is but one consideration among a variety of methodological considerations that cannot be neglected. Thus, the researcher must pay attention to issues to do with sampling, design, replicability of procedures, reliability of interpretation, range of applicability of the findings, and so forth. There are, of course, many textbooks dealing with these issues (for example, Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As mentioned earlier in relation to triangulation, different epistemological frameworks will result in different expectations about how knowledge and understanding can be achieved and how it can be authenticated. There is no particular reason to think that these broader epistemological and methodological issues demand separate and specific reappraisal when the research participants are children.

## Conclusion

Attempting to access and understand children's experience of their worlds presents researchers with a range of challenges. Our understanding will always be partial and imperfect. Our experience of the world is constantly unfolding and in flux. It is complex, multi-layered and not fully accessible to us let alone to others. For an adult researcher to understand the experience of a child (or children) who is a stranger is in many ways an impossible task. Yet it is an important one because for too long we have assumed that children have nothing of interest or importance to tell us about their lives and that we adults understand much better than they what is good for them and how events impact on them.

There are many reasons – scientific, moral, political and pragmatic – for researching children's experience. Children's perspectives on, or views about, issues and events can be seen as a subset of the wider enterprise that is aimed at understanding children's experience of the world. As the National Children's Bureau 'Highlight' on including children in social research states: 'Recent decades have witnessed an increasing interest in listening to children's views' (Harker, 2002). It is the task of the social researcher to provide the methods to enable this interest to become a worthwhile reality and the ongoing methodological analysis and critique that ensure that we can listen to children in ways that faithfully represent their views and their experiences of life. It is important that we avoid merely paying lip-service to the idea of listening to children or exploiting what we learn from children about their lives in ways that meet adult agendas only. We should contextualize our own research activities, not just the lives of the children we study. Thus, researchers are obligated to examine their reasons for carrying out research and the ends that their research might serve. It is important also that we do not fall into the trap of thinking that listening to children and understanding their experience of the world is a simple matter, either methodologically or politically.

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