

## Preface

In this book we have two main objectives. The first is to examine the theoretical and ethical issues that arise in researching children's experience and the second is to provide examples of how researchers from a variety of social science perspectives have set about carrying out research into children's experience. Our intention is to advance thinking and debate on why researching children's experience is important and on how it should be done. This book focuses on theory and practice and we hope that the reader will find within it both food for thought and very practical assistance in conducting research in this area. In the first section of the book we explore the theoretical and ethical issues and tensions that arise in researching what is inevitably a complex and sensitive topic and in the second part a range of authors discuss their approaches to accessing children's experience, outlining what they do and how they address the challenges entailed in using their particular method. We want this book to be useful to researchers embarking on research in this area and to experienced researchers who wish to explore new methods.

As editors we started this project with a number of core principles in mind. The first is that there is strength in a multi-disciplinary approach. Children's lives benefit from being considered from multiple perspectives and there is no one theoretical or methodological perspective which deserves to be dominant. The social science disciplines – sociology, anthropology, education, social work, social policy and psychology – have much to learn from each other. Children's lives are complex and multi-faceted and require an analysis that is informed by knowledge of biological, psychological and social factors and their interactions. Different theoretical standpoints can build on each other or, at very least, be open to being challenged by an alternative viewpoint.

Second, we are convinced that children are subject to historical and cultural influences that ensure that every child has an individual and unique experience of his or her childhood. Thus we were interested in approaches and methods of research that respected this individuality and diversity in children and childhoods. As a result, the methods described in this book are mainly, although not exclusively, qualitative since qualitative methods are suited to enquiry into children's unique and individual encounters with their worlds.

Third, we were interested in exploring and promoting those approaches that are premised on a view of children as human beings who share with

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adults a comparable level of agency (likewise constrained) and the capacity to reflect on, and shape, their own experience.

Interest in accessing children's perspectives and views has been prompted in recent years by widespread acceptance and official endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child, in itself a consequence of social movements which recognized and sought to vindicate children's rights. From this point of view it could be argued that we have an obligation to assist children to express their perspectives and views of matters of importance to them. We leave aside inevitably vexed questions about how this should be done and with what end. In this book we are not interested exclusively in methods of eliciting children's perspectives, views and opinions. Our primary focus is on children's experience, which is a factor in the formation of their opinions, but is about more than that, it is about the totality of their subjective engagement with the world.

From a scientific perspective also we have much to learn about children from children. By enquiring into children's experience we will come to know more about how they interpret and negotiate their worlds, material and discursive, present, past and future. Knowledge about children includes knowledge about children's subjectivity and requires and deserves careful analysis and the use of appropriate methods. For example, we include in this book, observational studies on young children where the focus is on activity, but the intention is to infer what the activity means to the children concerned, not to assess levels or types of behaviour. Such an approach may be seen as problematic and indeed many of the issues arising in this arena are problematic and contested, and may well remain so.

We fully recognize the multiple and sometimes, but not always, compatible perspectives that exist in this field and thus, in this book, we have brought together authors from different disciplinary backgrounds and with different theoretical standpoints. What they share is an interest in developing research methods that can tell us more about how children experience their daily lives and make sense of their position in the world.

The editors of this book are both psychologists who freely admit to a frustration with the 'objective' stance of many of our colleagues in developmental psychology. Psychology's focus on the objective is seen in both its methodology and in its choice of subject matter. There is still little acceptance of the epistemological arguments that question our capacity to measure objectively our human subjects, and there is still a wariness of relying on children's views of their own lives and therefore of their experience. Children's individual experience is typically not valued as a focus of research since it is perceived as unreliable and idiosyncratic. In its urge to assess and measure the child, some mainstream developmental psychology has sought to homogenize the experience of children. (These issues are explored in more detail by Diane Hogan, and by Sheila Greene and Malcolm Hill in their chapters.) This characterization of developmental psychology is of course incomplete and to some extent a cartoon drawing. There, is in the mainstream, more recognition of diversity and on the margins more critique of traditional epistemology and methodology. Research on children and childhood in recent years has been

strongly influenced by the emergence of the new sociology of childhood, as described by Pia Christensen and Alan Prout. More recently we have seen the emergence of childhood studies as an interdisciplinary field. While welcoming this coming together of disciplines, we would see strength in maintaining disciplinary diversity also. For example, while being very critical of some of the manifestations of our own discipline, we would both see it as essential to the study of children that we continue to address questions to do with psychological growth and change in time. We would therefore see a continuing place for developmental psychology in the consortium of disciplines with a shared interest in researching children and childhood.

In compiling the chapters for this book we were surprised again and again by how little explicit attention to method there is in published research on children or childhood. In journal articles, which are the main vehicle for publishing empirical research, much attention is given to describing the method, but very little attention is given to the rationale for using the method in the first place or to a critique of the method's strengths and weaknesses, including the practical and ethical problems arising when employing it. In the last (fifth of four volumes) edition of the *Handbook of Child Psychology*, we were struck by the relative neglect of attention to research methods. In looking for researchers who specialize in analysis of issues arising when using qualitative methods with children, we noted the huge expansion in the use of qualitative methods in research, but the lack of discussion about methodological issues in relation to children. We are encouraged, however, by the growth of interest in this area and note the publication of several texts in recent years that complement this one. We hope that this book will provide social science researchers with a broad conceptual framework for understanding and researching children's subjectivities and lived experiences, and equip them with a range of methods appropriate to the exploration and analysis of children's experience.

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Editors

