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INTRODUCTION

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- What are children?
- How can we, as adults, find out about them, their lives and their experiences?
- How can we engage with children in ways that are respectful, mutually beneficial and liberating, rather than exploitative or dominating?
- How can we involve the children themselves in these processes? And what options are available to us for sharing what we find out?

These questions have been explored over the past two decades through a growing literature to which this book aims to contribute. Children have been a focus of the psycho-social sciences tracing back to the start of the twentieth century (Hendrick, 2003), but they were most often the *objects* of research. Now, there is intense interest in children as the *subjects* of research, perceiving them as having something salient to contribute to the questions at hand. Even further, there is a growing commitment to engaging children as collaborators or supporting their own initiatives (for an overview, see Hill et al., 2004; Hinton, 2008; and Chapter 4, this book).

Yet as a team, we have found that these trends raise many more questions than they answer. Our aim in this book, therefore, is to provide you with a range of resources for thinking through some of these questions in your own work. Throughout, we prefer to suggest possibilities than prescribe solutions. We do not think that there is any one 'right' way to 'do' research design, ethics and data collection, or any definitive answers about how to involve children in research or disseminate findings. We see a range of possible approaches, each of which has certain advantages and disadvantages, depending on the context. We therefore seek to go beyond the taken-for-granted mantras of research methods in childhood studies by asking questions that do not presume a right or wrong answer. By sharing some of our own dilemmas, and inviting you to consider the merits of different responses to these, we hope to offer practical advice in a way that does justice to the complexity of carrying out research with children.

ACTIVITY

Consider these quotes from children (Save the Children, 2001 and Council for Disabled Children, 2008):

- 'People should listen and not talk down to us because we are young' (young person aged 12)
- 'It [being included] is about letting everyone have a say and it doesn't matter if you can't read or you don't have a car' (young person aged 9)
- 'Once I was asked a questionnaire but I did not understand the questions so I just said "yes" and "no" where I thought I should!' (young person aged 13)
- 'Pass on what we mean not what you think we mean!' (young person aged 15)
- 'Don't guess what we want'
- 'Trust us – we need to trust you'

What do the quotes tell you about how these children experienced research, consultation and evaluation? What implications would this have for practice?

Reflecting the diversity of research with children, the book contains diverse materials: chapters discussing the overarching themes of ethics, data collection, involving children and dissemination; case studies describing a variety of research, consultation and evaluation projects; top tips scattered throughout the book, from a wide range of colleagues working in different fields, including both practitioners and academics; activities for you to work through; a toolkit offering a wealth of ideas for group work; and a glossary to help with unfamiliar terms. Rather than try to smooth over the differences between our contributors, we have tried to draw these out where possible. We therefore encourage you to disagree with us and the case study authors where you see fit.

By way of introducing this material, we begin by briefly reviewing recent trends in childhood studies. We then discuss the range of possible reasons for carrying out research with children, and the possible differences between research with adults and with children. Finally, we map out in more detail the remainder of the book, its structure and key themes.

Research in Childhood Studies and Children's Rights

The interdisciplinary field of childhood studies, drawing on a variety of social sciences, has promoted a rethinking of children's traditionally dependent, objecti-fied status within research methods. Arguments are now well established that researchers should recognize children's agency, their citizenship as human beings now and not just in the future, and involve children as (the central) research par-ticipants. More fundamentally, childhood studies has challenged taken-for-granted ideas of childhood. Historical and cross-cultural comparisons demonstrate that concepts of childhood are not universal nor inevitable (Ariès, 1973; Pollock, 1983; Hendrick, 2003).

Childhood studies has thus encouraged us to look critically at our own and others' conceptualizations of childhood, and recognize their impact on structures, services and relationships. This equally applies to those involved in research with children. All of us will come to such activities with our own particular backgrounds, and associated assumptions about childhood and youth. This will influence how we carry out our research, in terms of the questions posed, the characteristics of the participants, the methods used, the ethical frameworks and the outcomes.

As authors, we have found it helpful to consider our own assumptions about childhood and youth. We share a desire to see children as active beings, and not just passive recipients of parental or professional care. Like many others in the field, we have been influenced by the UNCRC with its commitment to children's rights, particularly to participation. At the same time, we increasingly perceive problems with these approaches. We are sympathetic, for example, to recent calls to rehabilitate the notion of children as 'becoming' beings. Though denigrated for its normalizing use within traditional developmental psychology (Burman, 1994; see Hogan, 2005, for a full review), we think that rethinking 'becoming', emergence and immaturity as valuable attributes of human existence has much potential to enrich our research practice (Prout, 2005; Gallacher and Gallagher, forthcoming). Thinking of both children and adults as 'becoming-beings' also raises questions about the focus on children's rights, since rights have historically been associated with a conception of the individual as a rational, stable, self-controlling being (Lee, 2001). We recognize the power of a rights discourse to achieve our political aims (Hill and Tisdall, 1997), but at the same time we question whether the model of children as independent, competent, individual agents – 'experts in their own lives' – is inherently liberating (Foucault, 1977; Rose, 1999; Gallagher, 2006).

The UNCRC

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was passed by the UN Assembly in 1989. Countries may ratify the Convention and are then obligated to translate the UNCRC's articles into reality. The UNCRC is the most ratified human rights convention in the world.

For more information, see

- UNICEF website: www.unicef.org/why/why_rights.html [this includes the Articles of the Convention]
- UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, see reports by country: www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/
- Children's Rights Information Network: www.crin.org/

There is considerable commentary and critique on children's rights. Three journals that frequently have relevant articles are Childhood, Children and Society and the International Journal of Children's Rights.

Much of the recent research activity in the children's rights and participation field is termed consultation. The line between research and consultation is a matter for

contention. Of course, some research with children asks very different questions to consultation activities, but there is considerable overlap, and a great deal of childhood studies research does aim to influence policy and services. Techniques used to consult with children (see for example Save the Children Scotland, 2001) are also used by those funded to do research. Researchers have been hired to undertake consultations with children, to influence services and policies. We can, however, see certain differences between the two. There are different institutional and organizational ethical requirements, different funding sources and timeframes, and sometimes different professional backgrounds of the adults involved. Beyond these practical differences, there are disparities about what makes 'good' evidence or consultation, in both process and outcome. We can ask some questions, even if we cannot provide the answers:

- Should the **ethical** standards for research and consultation be the same?
- What claims do we make about **validity**, **reliability** and **generalizability** in research and consultation? Should they meet the same standards? If not, why not?
- What outcomes do we expect of research and consultation? What wider impacts do we expect or hope for? Are the expectations of the adults involved co-current with those of the children involved?

Evaluation is yet another similar term. We can distinguish it by its focus and function: evaluation aims to assess the effectiveness of a particular programme, policy or service in achieving its objectives and it typically seeks to contribute to improvements in this programme, policy or service in the future. Evaluation often struggles with how to measure outcomes, particularly when there are multiple influences on participants and **randomized control trials** are not practical or perhaps even ethical. We revisit these issues of **methodology** in our data collection chapter, whilst our case study authors discuss how they approached their projects as research, consultation or evaluation.

Below, we explore two further issues in 'positioning' the book. First, we consider if and how research, consultation and evaluation are important activities to be engaged in. Second, we look at how and in what ways research with children is different from research with adults, and the implications thereof. The final section provides you with an overview of the book and our approach.

Why do research with children?

Understanding research in the broadest sense, including consultation, evaluation and many forms of participation, we can make several arguments about why such activities are worthwhile. First, we think that research might open up new possibilities for children, and society more generally. It can question the ways in which we have always done or thought about things. It can raise issues that might not otherwise have been considered, and suggest options that would otherwise not have been conceived. Research can help us to think differently (Foucault, 1985). To this end, Chapters 2 and 3 invite you to reflect on how you think about children, and whether you might benefit from thinking differently. Our chapter on data collection particularly invites you to situate yourself, and asks how your ideas of childhood might affect your **research design**.

Research can also be a means of representation, a way to ensure that children's views and experiences are not only listened to but heard by other groups. Domestic violence, for example, was seen as a private problem for a considerable time in Northern societies; only recently has it been seen as a societal problem, that affects children as well as adults (Hester et al., 2006). There is already a world-wide turn to governance rather than government, an increased hope in civil society, partnerships and networks, and community participation as a key part of this (see Barnes et al., 2007; Tisdall, 2008). Recognizing that children should and can contribute to these activities is one way to ensure that their interests and views are not forgotten. With this in mind, Chapter 5, on **dissemination** and engagement, offers a range of options for representing children in research outputs. It also critically reviews ideas of knowledge transfer and evidence-based policy and practice, asking whether and how research findings really do contribute to social and political change.

Equally, we could argue that research can be a transformative practice in itself, undermining the distinction between process and outputs, means and ends. **Action research** and **participatory** models of practice have become increasingly popular in work with children, as we discuss in detail in Chapter 4. In these approaches, research may be seen as a process of empowerment, politicization and consciousness-raising (Cahill, 2004; Cairns, 2006) or as a form of experiential learning (exemplified by Anne Cunningham's case study in this volume). But it may also be seen as a profoundly emotional process. Some authors suggest that listening to people talk about their lives and concerns in **qualitative** studies has some similarities with therapeutic practices (Birch and Miller, 2000) and can be seen as a practice of care (Vivat, 2002). When working with children, we would see the caring work of research as an acknowledgement of human interdependence, rather than as a one-way process that reconstructs children as essentially dependent upon adults.

Doing research with children

Much has been written about the differences between research with children and research with adults (Punch, 2002). There have been debates about what the adult role should be in research involving children. Mandell suggests that the desirable position is the 'least adult role': that is, 'While acknowledging adult-child differences, the research suspends all adult–like characteristics except physical size' (1991: 40). Others have disputed that this is either desirable or even possible, if one is an adult researcher (James et al., 1998; Harden et al., 2000). Christensen (2004) suggests that it may be more helpful to be an 'unusual adult'. **Post-modern** critiques of identity would suggest that a straightforward divide between adult and child may not be so simple in practice, as both adults and children have multiple identities that are continually reproduced and performed through everyday interactions.

Does research and consultation with children require different methods than for adults? There is a tendency towards more 'innovative' or 'creative' methods – such as art, photographs or video, or modifying various games. Many of these are discussed in Chapter 3 and in the group work toolkit. The box below provides some information from children themselves, about their own preferences.

What do children and young people have to say about methods?

We have little systematic and comparative information to answer this question. One source is Borland et al., 2001, commissioned by the Scottish Parliament (see also Hill, 2006 for journal article on this work). Eighteen focus group discussions were held: 12 with pupils aged 5–15 in mainstream schools and six 'special groups' including preschool children, and disabled and minority ethnic young people. Except for the preschool group, participants also filled in a questionnaire. Some of the findings are:

Small group discussions were a fairly popular choice but a 'worst' choice for a minority. The advantages were that groups could make participants less shy, generated more ideas, were fun, quick and convenient. Disadvantages were groups' limited numbers that left out other people and were not necessarily representative ('because there are a lot of people besides us and they didn't get a chance to join in'), and ideas may not be passed on to decision-makers accurately ('I think it's silly for other people to come out [to relay views]. If the Parliament wants to hear what we're saying, they should just come out themselves').

Surveys were a fairly popular choice but a 'worst' choice for a minority. Young participants were more likely to vote for them and questionnaire respondents. The most important advantage was their 'fairness' because many people could take part, giving an accurate portrait of young people's views. They could help shy individuals voice their opinions ('you're not going to be talked over if you've got a survey'). They were confidential, anonymous, easy and convenient. Surveys, though, could be boring and hard to understand. Participants may not be bothered to fill them in and give dishonest or trivial answers ('If you are given it in class, you just put down what your friend's putting down, or do something for a joke').

Online methods were not a popular choice in groups and were a frequent 'worst' choice in the questionnaires. Advantages were young people's familiarity with the Internet and its theoretical offer of privacy. However, not all young people have easy access to the Internet and there could easily be multiple voting.

See also:

- Edwards and Alldred (1999), for their research with primary and secondary school pupils
- Gray (2007), for young people's suggestions for a self-completion postal questionnaire
- Reeves and colleagues (2007) for their exploratory qualitative study with children, on ethical issues related to face-to-face survey interviews

As the box suggests, some adults' concerns about the formality and inaccessibility of surveys is not matched by all of the children: surveys can be inclusive, rather than exclusive. **Focus groups** are a very popular choice, currently, by policy commissioners and delivering organizations, at least for consultation in the UK. But this popularity is not felt by all the children. Focus groups may not be a good way to ensure a broad range of views are heard.

Perhaps a more useful way to frame this issue is *not* to distinguish simply between methods for children, and methods for adults. You may find it more useful to think about the particular children you are engaging with – the communications forms they like to use, the contexts in which they are, their own characteristics. For example, in her dissertation research, Jennifer Makin, one of our Master postgraduate students, told us about her experiences of using art work with young children in Cambodia, which the children appeared to enjoy very much. However, all attempts to encourage them to produce localized and individualized drawings representing aspects of their own experiences were unsuccessful. The children's parents were anxious for their children to be perceived as 'good' children by the foreign researcher, they believed their children lacked sufficient skills and experience to draw without guidance, and the parents were influenced by their experiences with an educational system that values rote learning over creativity. This defined the expectation of a 'good' drawing for these children and was reflected in the nearly identical and stylized representations of fruit, flowers and animals that they produced. We think that this story neatly captures the multi-layered complexity of research with children. It reinforces our sense that simplistic, universal prescriptions for methods may be of limited use where different social, cultural, economic and historical factors intersect.

Against this background, the remainder of this chapter maps out the contents of the book and its aims.

The Structure of the Text

The course on which this text was based was designed to offer 'advanced' skills, but as a team we have wrestled with what precisely this might mean. For the purposes of this book, this has translated into an approach where we encourage you to:

1. See a wide range of possible options in designing and carrying out research.
2. Reflect on which of these might be most helpful to you, given your own assumptions about children and childhood, your ethical and political standpoint, research topic and field of work.

To this end, we have tried to avoid suggesting that complex matters are susceptible to simple solutions, or from insisti ng that you *must* or *should* make certain choices when designing your research. Such dictates may be useful for uncertain novices, but we do not find these prescriptions especially helpful in our own work. Instead, we have preferred a more invitational tone, suggesting that you *might* find certain ideas helpful. In short, we have tried to enable you to decide for yourself what is most appropriate to your particular circumstances.

Childhood studies is inherently interdisciplinary, with leading contributors ranging from historians to literature analysts, from education practitioners to youth workers, legal philosophers to psychologists and sociologists. We ourselves work across various disciplines, from geography to social-legal studies, social anthropology to education research and social policy. However, we do not claim to be able to meet the agendas of all potential disciplines. The book is broadly situated within the social

sciences, and the areas of practice that make increasing use of social research, be it through consultation or participation in NGOs, or service evaluation in the public sector. It should be emphasized that the book is not designed solely for use by academic researchers. Several of our contributors work in non-academic contexts, and others, including the editors, work on the boundaries between academia, policy and practice. Many of our students have practitioner backgrounds, and this has had a profound and invigorating influence on our teaching – and hence on this book. As such, we hope that there will be something here for everyone but we do not expect anyone to find everything in the book useful.

In addition to this introduction, the book contains chapters covering four broad topics:

• Chapter 2, considering ethics
• Chapter 3, discussing data collection and analysis, including issues in research design, a range of data collection methods, and commentary on recording and analysis
• Chapter 4, on involving children in your activities, including peer research
• Chapter 5, on dissemination and engagement

Any division of material has its limitations, and we do want to suggest the benefits of considering research design holistically – so that ethical questions remain throughout, for example, and dissemination and engagement are discussed from the start of your design and not as an afterthought.

The book features II case studies, which we hope will enable you to engage with the experiences and agendas of authors with various work backgrounds. For example, we have contributions from practitioners (Liam Cairns on Investing in Children Durham, Anne Cunningham on participatory work with children on school architecture, and Susan Stewart who manages a family centre), from research teams (for example, Fiona Mitchell on unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors and Helen Kay on children affected by parental HIV and AIDS), and from authors writing about their Masters and PhD research (for example, Sam Punch on children in rural Bolivia and Michael Gallagher on children and schools). Case studies range across disciplinary backgrounds, where the research took place, the ages and particular characteristics of children, and methodologies. We asked all case studies authors to write under set headings, from aims and objectives, to ethical issues, analysis methods, and reporting and feedback. As analysis and reporting are frequently under-discussed in the literature, we encouraged the contributors to go into some detail here. We explicitly asked our case study authors to explore their research critically, discussing dilemmas and describing how they tackled difficult issues. We have not sought to iron out differences between case studies and our chapters. You may also disagree with some choices made by the writers and we again encourage you to use such disagreement as a source of debate. Each case study is introduced with a brief overview of its context, along with particular elements which we seek to highlight in the book. The chapters cross-refer to particular case studies to draw out examples and key themes.

We also have 'top tips' contributed by a wide range of people. This exercise started with an email out to various contacts and the initial response was surprisingly extensive and fascinating. We continue this with each offering of the course, and recently did

a broader email contact to update our list. Inevitably, limitations of space mean that only a small selection of the top tips are reproduced here, but a full list is available on our website (www.childhoodstudies.ed.ac.uk). Readers who would like to contribute their own top tips to this expanding resource are warmly invited to do so via email with one of the editors. The top tips are inserted throughout the chapters, as are a number of activities, which we use in course sessions and which you could use individually or in groups yourself. We have included certain references and websites on key areas. Further references and web links are available on our website, which we will seek to keep updated over the coming years. Following on from requests from course participants, we developed a 'toolkit' which you may find useful in working with groups. And we have a glossary, should you wish to look up particular terms used in the book.

Finally, we would like to extend to you an invitation to engage critically with our material and debate with it. This book addresses a rapidly growing area of direct research, consultation and evaluation with and by children. There is much to question in our existing assumptions, practices and ethics. The book seeks to contribute to this – and we hope you will do so as well.

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