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Children as researchers: the effects of participation rights on research methodology

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Introduction

Increasingly, children are being involved as researchers, and this chapter considers issues raised for adults who do research with child researchers. The points will be illustrated through a review of an international literature rather than an original research report. Three main areas will be discussed: stages of the research process at which children can be involved as actors; levels of children's participation; and the use of methods which can increase children's informed involvement in research, thereby respecting their rights. The idea of seeing the 'researched' adult as a co-researcher or co-producer of data, and equally involved in the analysis, is already widely acknowledged. This idea is usually argued for in terms of control, and of addressing power imbalances in the research relationship. It can also be justified in terms of efficiency, as opening the way to a broader range of collection methods and fuller understanding of the data. This chapter, similarly, sees children as co-producers of data during research conducted with them.

An explicit and implicit theme within this type of co-research is respect for the researched group and for their own views and abilities. Respect links closely to rights, and rights Conventions offer a principled, yet flexible, means of justifying and extending respectful practices (Spencer, 1998). Rights Conventions which have near-universal support and quasi-legal status therefore provide formal justification for observing ethical standards in research. This growing awareness of the rights of children, and other 'minority' groups including women, has paved the way for involving children as researchers.

Internationally, children's rights have taken on a new dimension in the past decade with the so-called participation rights. Traditionally, children have been excluded from what are known as the first generation or autonomy rights: freedom from interference and rights to physical and mental integrity and self-determination. Instead, children were assumed to be under their parents' protection and control. International declarations of children's rights, initially concerned with war victims, stressed their needs for protection from neglect and abuse and for provision of goods and services. Until recently, research about children has reflected these priorities, mainly by measuring the effects of health or education interventions in their lives, or their needs as assessed by adults, or investigating their gradual development and socialisation towards adult competence.

However, the new dimension of children's participation rights, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (UN 1989), involves moderate versions of adult autonomy rights. They concern children taking part, in activities and decisions which affect them. Participation rights include especially three of the Convention's 54 articles. State parties should assure:

> the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (12); (figures in brackets

> refer to the relevant article of the Convention)
>
> the right to freedom of expression [including] freedom to seek, review and impart information and ideas of all kind... through any other media of the child's choice (13);
>
> the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and ... cultural life and the arts' (31).

The rights are qualified in important ways. Some, for example, are aspirational, not yet fully realisable, but only 'to the maximum extent of [each nation's] available resources' (4). The rights are also not absolute but conditional, affected by the 'evolving capacities of the child', the 'responsibilities, rights and duties of parents'(5) and the national law. 'The best interests of the child must be the primary consideration'(1, 21). Children's rights cannot be exercised in ways which would harm the child or other people. They must 'respect the rights and reputations of others', as well as 'national security and public order, health and morals' (13). The rights are not about selfish individualism but about solidarity, social justice and fair distribution. To claim a right is to acknowledge that everyone else has an equal claim to it. The claim affirms the worth and dignity of every person. Respect for children's rights promotes 'social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom' (preamble of the Convention). Every government except the United States and Somalia has ratified the Convention, undertaking to publicise it 'to adults and children alike', to bring state laws and services to accord with it, and to report regularly to the UN on progress in doing so. Yet children's rights remain problematic with controversies about how participation rights can complement yet also conflict with provision and protection rights (Alderson and Goodwin, 1993).

In these controversies, there are several influences which have altered the status of children in research, and as researchers, during the 1990s, for instance: the aftermath of the Gillick ruling in 1985 that children aged under 16 can give valid consent (for a review see Alderson and Montgomery, 1996); new respect in the sociology of childhood for children as competent social actors, who are no longer seen as simply subsumed under adult-dominated headings like the family (Qvortrup et al, 1994; James and Prout, 1997); the well-publicised eloquence of young children, for example, on television. Importantly, for this chapter, there is also research by children themselves, which has been largely sponsored by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in accordance with the UN Convention, and which will be considered in the rest of this chapter.

Issues which children's rights raise for adult researchers

Children's participation involves a changing emphasis in research methods and topics. Recognising children as subjects rather than objects of research entails accepting that children can 'speak' in their own right and report valid views and experiences. Such 'speaking' may involve sign language when children cannot hear or talk, and other expressive body language and sounds, such as those made by children with autism and severe learning difficulties (Alderson and Goodey, 1998). To involve all children more directly in research can therefore rescue them from silence and exclusion, and from being represented, by default, as passive objects, while respect for their informed and voluntary consent helps to protect them from covert, invasive, exploitative or abusive research.

This latter point is important, for one major obstacle in conducting research with children concerns infantilising them, perceiving and treating them as immature and, in so doing, producing evidence to reinforce notions of their incompetence. This can include `talking down' to children by using over-simple words and concepts, restricting them into making only superficial responses, and involving only inexperienced children and not those with intense relevant experience who could give much more informed responses. For example, children's views about illness and medical treatments are frequently collected from average samples of mainly healthy children (Wilkinson, 1988). They appear to be relatively ignorant, despite information they may have gained from television and other sources. Children who have chronic illness, on the other hand, will have far greater knowledge about the nature and purpose of medical treatments; 2-year-olds with cancer can talk with great understanding that challenges beliefs about their inability to understand (Kendrick 1988).

Alternatively, researchers' over-complicated or poorly explained terms, topics and methods can also misleadingly make children (and some adults) appear to be ignorant or incapable. Children may help adult researchers to set more appropriate levels of talk (Solberg, 1997; and see O'Kane this volume). During research about children's consent to surgery, I asked a 10-year-old, `So you are having your legs made longer?' and she replied, `I suffer from achondroplasia and I am having my femurs lengthened,' politely showing me her sophisticated level of talk and insight (Alderson, 1993).

Another obstacle for children is the common assumption by adults that the consent of parents or teachers will suffice, and that children need not or cannot express their own consent or refusal to take part in research. The British Education Research Association (BERA, 1992) does not even mention children's consent in its ethical guidelines. Social research can therefore contribute to the extensive debate about children's consent (for a review see Alderson, 1995), by providing evidence of children's competence in their daily life and in research (for example, in Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998). In the sociology of childhood, it is now commonplace to assert that children are and must be seen as actors in the social construction and determination of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of their society. Two related questions therefore arise. Firstly, if children's social relations and culture are worthy of study in their own right, then who is better qualified to research some aspects of their lives than children themselves? (James and Prout, 1997). Secondly, if children can be active participants, as this chapter considers, can they also be active researchers?

Children as researchers

A first way in which children are researchers is in the everyday projects children do at school. In schools I have visited, for example, Adam aged 5 made a graph about pets owned by children in his class, and Helen aged 16 tape-recorded interviews with her friends about their parents' divorce for her A level psychology project. Tariq's geography GCSE project was about the local allotments threatened with closure and involved him in checking local authority records and observing a council meeting. Classes of 9- to 11-year-olds watched a video about ponds, then had a brain-storming circle time and small group discussions to plan and draw a pond for their school playground. They worked to a budget and with adults' help created and stocked the pond.

In these examples, learning, the main occupation for everyone at school, overlaps with research, but this wealth of research in British schools is almost entirely unpublished, and tends to be seen as ‘practising’ rather than as worthwhile in its own right, In contrast, comparable activities may be highly valued in other societies, as shown in the next example. Many Ugandan children are the first generation to attend school and they become research and health educators for the community. Through the Child-to-Child Trust which promotes peer education, the 600 children at a village primary school became concerned that animals used the main well-pond. The children spoke with the village leader who called a meeting at which the children presented poems and dramas about the value of clean water. As a result, children and adults worked together on cleaning the well-pond and building fence to keep out the animals (ISCA, 1995:236).

The second most usual way in which children are involved in research is in projects designed and conducted by adults (see O’Kane; Davis et al, Roberts, and Christensen and James in this volume). However, besides providing data in their traditional role as research subjects, increasingly, children help to plan questions, and collect, analyse or report evidence, or publicise the findings. For example, on an accident-prone estate,

> ‘teenagers had little to say about the kinds of events we [the researchers] had thought of as accidents. Nor did they respond well to the notion of safety or safe-keeping. In the end we asked them what our opening question should be. ‘Ask us about our scars’, they replied. So we did, and it resulted in animated and detailed information about a number of accident events’ (Roberts et al, 1995).

The teenagers’ initial responses could easily have been used to confirm assumptions about their ignorance and incompetence. In contrast, the partnership approach helped to develop new theories and methods for research about accidents and their prevention, and produced conclusions, and further projects with younger children.

Indeed, children are possibly more likely than adults to be interested in every stage of research. Many of them are used to enquiring, scrutinising, accepting unexpected results, revising their ideas, and assuming that their knowledge is incomplete and provisional. Pre-school children frequently ask basic questions about philosophy and method and by five years have worked out understandings which last a life-time (Lipman, 1993; Tizzard and Hughes; 1984; Gardner, 1993). Very young children can also share in making group decisions and agreeing on priorities (Miller, 1997). Children may have less to lose, and more to gain, by asking radical questions, such as: Why do we have school assembly? Adults, by contrast, can feel threatened by research which might critically question their own expertise, authority or convenience.

The third and less common but expanding area is research which is mainly initiated and directed by children and teenagers (West, 1997; PEG 1998a, 1998b). Methods of involving unschooled adults as researchers, such as through participatory rural appraisal (Pratt and Loizos, 1992), are also used effectively with and by children (Johnson and Ivan-Smith 1996; O’Kane and Christensen and James this volume).The following sections review the stages, levels and methods through which children are involved as researchers.

Stages of research when children are involved

Research in schools and universities, when the main object is to add to knowledge, tends to concentrate on the middle stages: collecting and analysing data and writing reports. In contrast, research by young people themselves, which is concerned with achieving changes in, for example access, opportunities or the way services are provided, often also emphasises the early and follow up stages of the research process. The early stages include selecting and setting up the research team and sample groups, avoiding tokenism, working out team and power relationships and ways of resolving problems as they arise, jointly deciding the agenda, aims, methods and payments in cash or in kind (for example, Cockburn et al, 1997). These important initial decisions are often taken for granted in hierarchical professional research teams. Children and teenagers also tend to be deeply concerned from the start with the follow up stages of publicity and using research findings to change the world. ‘We want to show this to the social workers/ planning officers/ Department for Education,’ may be explicit initial aims (PEG, and Allan Siddall, personal communication). The national movement of street children in Brazil, for example, during the late 1980s, influenced the drafting of legal codes ranging from the new federal constitution to municipal laws which enshrine children’s rights based on research they had conducted (SCF, 1995). The following examples illustrate ways in which young people work at various stages of research.

The Participation and Education Group (PEG 1998a) researched how unhealthy schools can be. The replies to the 14 questions, from 187 young people aged from 5 to 25, vividly combine physical with mental health: ‘If you can’t do the work you get picked on and called thick. You feel sick and bad.’ The lively research report includes graphs and pie charts, poems, quotations and makes strong recommendations. PEG also made dramatic presentations about their research to health professionals, and at the Department for Education and Employment. They use equal opportunity methods promoted in assertion training and by rights workers (Treseder 1997). Their assertiveness, after only brief training, challenges assumptions that children are inevitably vulnerable. For example, some of the youngest members drew up the agenda and chaired a meeting of young people aged from eight years and adults, to plan a conference. They stated the rules of listening with respect, and the adults were politely reminded not to interrupt or talk down to children, and everyone had a turn to speak to questions such as: Why are we having this meeting? What did you get out of the meeting? (PEG 1998b).

In Camden, London, Bangladeshi teenagers researched the play and leisure needs of Bangladeshi children, and young children shared in designing and developing the project to ensure that it took accurate account of their perspectives which are literally a low-down child’s eye view (Howarth, 1997). The young researchers used qualitative and quantitative methods, with focus groups, an audit of play provision, interviews with 83 8-12-year-olds, and with parents, head teachers and community workers. They discovered why so few children used public play facilities and recommended how make them more safe and attractive.

In another community project, children aged 3- to 8-years used cameras and conducted surveys and interviews about children’s views on improving their housing estate. They published an illustrated report, which six of them presented and discussed with local authority officers at a ‘proper’ meeting round a table. Some of their recommendations were used, such as having the playground in the centre of the estate, not on the edge and beyond busy peripheral roads as the adults had planned (Miller 1997).

Young people also help to disseminate research memorably. At a conference of over 200 health professionals which I attended in 1994, seven teenagers presented accounts and poems to.

First, they asked the attenders to put their hands over their ears. This lasted for over a minute and felt much longer. Smiles among the audience began to change into bewilderment. At last the teenagers said, ‘Now you can take your hands away. You ask us what it is like for us when we talk to health workers. That is usually what it is like.’ Another instance of the drama and immediacy which young people’s presentations can have occurred at a Barnardo’s conference to launch the research report on Listening to children (Alderson, 1995). Five teenagers, dressed all in black, presented a short play in which they wove the Hansel and Gretel story and French mime techniques into a sombre, poignant depiction of children’s despair at not being heard. Although I had written the report, and spoke at the conference, all my nervousness was concentrated on the actors. Would they actually turn up? What were they going to do? Would it be an appalling flop? Would we hurt the young people, and the whole message of the day, by entrusting so much responsibility to them? It is risky to ask inexperienced and traditionally unheard young people to appear at daunting public meetings, and to give much more than a typical speech, and it is hard to overcome adult anxieties about this. In the event, the play was successful in influencing the hearts and minds of policy makers. After prolonged applause, the director of Barnardo’s thanked them and then invited questions about earlier sessions. After a long silence, a senior Department of Health official said he thought everyone was too deeply impressed by the play to talk about other topics.

Levels of children’s involvement

The term ‘child-centred research’ loosely covers methods, stages or levels of children’s involvement (Connolly and Ennew, 1996). Although methods involving games may appear child-friendly, a crucial aspect is the level at which adults share or hold back knowledge and control from children. The different levels of control-sharing and of children’s participation have been compared, for example, with rungs on a ladder (Arnstein, 1979; Hart, 1992). At the lowest levels is the pretence of shared work: manipulation, decoration and tokenism. The next levels involve actual participation: children being assigned to tasks although being informed and consulted; and adults initiating but also sharing decisions with children. The top two levels concern projects more fully initiated and directed by children.

The ladder image can be a useful guide towards assessing how far children are or could be participating with the interpersonal and structural barriers to overcome. One main barrier is the way funders seldom fund the important initial and follow up stages of research described earlier as so important to young people. Ways of involving children more fully in making policy decisions have been extensively reported (Lorenzo, 1992; Miller 1997; Wellard et al, 1997). However, levels of children’s participation are also affected by children’s capacity to understand the relevant issues. Can young children, for example, understand critical analysis, or the politics of racism? A report by a teacher suggests that the 7-year-olds she taught could do so (Butler 1998). She describes how black children in down-town Chicago became conscious of racial, economic and political oppressions, as they discussed their own experiences intensely in class. If someone wanted to talk about rocks or ants or something not obviously related to justice, they would say, ‘That’s nice, but what does that have to do with peace and power?’ ‘How you gonna help your Brothers and Sisters by talking about that?’ They analysed contradictions between the rhetoric and reality in their lives, the social pressures that restrict individual agency, and how they can work for social justice, power, unity and community change.

Methods used by young researchers

Children working as researchers use many methods, singly or in groups, with or without adults. They select research topics, general questions and methods, decide specific survey questions or interview topics, and select respondents and observation sites. Some conduct pilots and revise their plans, and plan the data collection, collation and analysis. After the analysis by hand or computer, they write reports and disseminate the findings, and discuss them with policy makers (for example, SCF 1996, 1997; Ash et al 1997; Beresford 1997; Wellard et al 1997; PEG 1998a, 1998b). Research reports by young groups range from long typed reports (West, 1997) to a simple poster or wall newspaper, a video or photographic exhibition, with reports and drawings by the whole team or from smaller groups (Howarth, 1997; Johnson et al 1996). School projects have included: producing a video and exhibition on a town's facilities for disabled people; and surveying and proposing new road safety measures which were built. Children have also been involved in projects ranging from improving architectural designs for a new children's hospital in Derby, to working on anti-poverty measures in Greenwich (all in Willow, 1997). One group reviewed multi-cultural policies in their school, designed and presented a policy to the student council, and planned in-service training sessions for school governors and staff with a local race relations group (CCSE, nd).

Some young children seem to be able to understand complex methods. For example, Emily Rosa, aged 9, designed an elegant randomised trial of 21 therapeutic touch healers who took part in 280 tests. They put their hands through holes in a screen 30 cm apart, and Emily spun a coin to determine whether she would hold her hands just about their left or right hand. The aim was to show whether the healers were aware of the kinds of human energy fields through which they claim to heal. Accuracy would have to be well above 50% to demonstrate sensitivity, but was only 47% in the first trial and 41% in the second. Emily's mother believed that the healers took part because they did not feel threatened by a child, and experts praised this simple and novel way of gaining evidence that casts strong doubt on the healers' claims. Previously, complicated, lengthy and expensive trials had compared patients' healing rates after therapeutic touch and more orthodox treatments (Rosa 1998).

Young researchers around England have used Open College training materials to conduct ambitious projects. School girls investigating children's participation rights decided to interview the Directors of Education, Social and Leisure Services, the Chief Executives and Council Leaders and some Assistant Chief Constables in six North-East local authorities. They practised tape-recording and taking notes during interviews with their teachers and a research officer who later debriefed them. In pairs, they piloted interviews with a senior researcher who thought they 'were brilliant' and that he would not have been able to arrange the access which they achieved - they had only one refusal (Allan Siddall, personal communication). The girls discussed the merits of qualitative and quantitative methods when analysing their interviews, and considered how their evidence clearly showed that the officers' rhetoric did not fit the reality. They presented their work (Nevison, 1997) which now influences local policies, at a launch and at national conferences.

In another project, care leavers aged 16-years and older investigated experiences of young people leaving care in five British cities. This group is highly over-represented among the homeless and prison population. The young researchers chose the research topics and questions during five residential meetings, and interviewed 80 young care leavers and 22 social work staff. They undertook full qualitative analysis of the results and made recommendations based on these. They worked on writing and launching the report and talked to the media. Later they talked to local authorities about the work, and made a video (West, 1997). Another project combined different teams with a central research group, and flexible use of core questions on 12 research sites. A key coordinating worker liaised with one practitioner and two young people on each site, and all of them made up the research group which took overall control over methods and editing of reports. They identified the main themes and 20 questions per theme. They worked mainly in schools, but also with groups of refugees and homeless young people (Kenny and Cockburn, 1997).

Another example of methods used by children is textual analysis. On the Children's Express, the reporters, aged 8-13, conduct penetrating interviews, and the editors are aged 14-18. Most of them come from backgrounds which offer them few opportunities, and they publish reports in many newspapers and magazines. Recently, 27 of them monitored 400 stories in the national press to find that every article stereotyped children - as victims, cute, evil, exceptionally excelling, corrupted, as accessories to adults or as `brave little angels'. They held a conference in 1998 Kids these days to publicise their research (Neustatter, 1998).

Research and play

A striking aspect of children's research is the combining of work and play. Young researchers use 'ice-breaking' sessions to help one another to feel confident and relaxed, more willing to listen to one another and to risk sharing ideas with less fear of being dismissed (Johnson et al, 1996; Tresedar, 1997). The UN Convention links rights to engage in cultural life with the right to play (article 31) resonating with the way play methods can enhance children's research imagination. For example, talking about 'let's pretend' can involve young children in planning improvements in playgrounds and nurseries (Miller, 1997). Similarly, one lively, well illustrated pack produced with children shows how to promote genuine participation, negotiation and power sharing through games, with details on promoting equal opportunities and 'chat space methods' (SCF and Kirklees, 1996). The play approaches help research teams to enjoy being together as well as working together, and help to sustain the enthusiasm of children who are usually volunteers. Young children can be good at listening, questioning, challenging, keeping to the point, and helping each other to learn and develop ideas (McNamara and Moreton, 1997; O'Kane this volume). For example, adults with young children select topics and ideas and note them in words or pictures on large sheets and everyone has coloured sticky dots to put beside the most liked items. This provides an instant relatively anonymous evaluation for everyone to see at a glance. It is one of several democratic, quick and fun ways to assess opinions. Very young or illiterate children can contribute detailed data through their songs and dreams, by models, drawings or maps about their daily mobility and routines (Johnson et al 1995; Boyden and Ennew, 1997) or about their local wild life (Hart, 1997).

Research and work

It has been argued that children's work mirrors adults' work, in being mainly either physical or mental labour (Qvortrup, 1997). European and north American societies tend to identify work, and therefore research, with mental effort. In cultures where the emphasis is more on physical work, the next examples could be seen as action research, because knowledge is gained through learning from difficulties, planning projects, collecting and applying new knowledge, publicising the research products (food and news) and testing public responses. In one example, during their monthly meetings, street boys in New Delhi realised that they spent 75 per cent of their money on food and they planned their project. Twelve boys, aged 7 to 17, took an intensive ten day course on cooking, nutrition, cleanliness, looking after customers and book-keeping, and they had help with renting a space for a restaurant. They took half pay at first, saying ‘you can’t expect to be an over-night success in this business, one has to bear losses for a while....and try very hard’. They gave free food to some street children, learned Chinese cooking to expand the menu, and planned to raise money to buy a van to take food to an area where there are many street children, financed by selling snacks in public places (ISCA, 1995:239). In a comparable example, in Sarajevo in 1993, 18 editors aged 10-to 13-years ran a radio programme, Colourful Wall, with an estimate audience of 80% of all the local citizens. They conducted polls of children’s views and based their programme planning on the results. They had 15 press centres through the city to which children brought news items, and when the phones were working these were phoned through to the radio station. Many schools were closed at the time, and many children were injured and bereaved. The programme carried education, entertainment and psychological support for them, with counsellors, a personal column section and a daily slot on children’s rights. The young disc jockeys were especially popular and, like the New Delhi boys, were keen to evaluate and expand their work.

Practical problems for child researchers

However, problems and questions arise for child researchers, as they do for adult ‘lay’ researchers (Pratt and Poizos, 1992) and for children who are the subjects of research (Alderson, 1995). How can young researchers work with adults on reasonably equal, informed and unpressured terms? How much responsibility is it fair to expect children to carry and how much should adults intervene to support them or to control the research? How can adults avoid exploiting or manipulating children, as in the participation ladders mentioned earlier? How much time can children be expected to give to research beyond the work they may already do at school, at home or outside the home, or begging? Should they be paid and, if so, how much, and in cash or in kind? There can be further problems with research expenses, and access to research meetings for children who have to have an adult escort. When research is conducted through schools, teachers may need to be, or insist on being, involved and this can set up new adult-child power imbalances to attend to. When child researchers seem to be over-impressed with, for example, the views of officials which they have collected, should adults encourage them to be more critical? And who should have final control over the data and any reports, the children or adult or both jointly?

Journalists, for example, may be more willing to publicise research by children, but may also mis-report them, as they mis-report some adults’ research. A junior school was praised in the Guardian for its hard-won innovations (Highfield, 1997), but these were disparaged in the local newspaper. When the children complained to the editor he refused to respond, so every child in the school wrote a letter to fax to him. After his fax had been jammed for some hours, the editor agreed to accept their public right of reply. The head teacher believed they were exercising their democratic rights as citizens.

I have mentioned just a few from many potential complications to show that working with child researchers does not simply resolve problems of power, exploitation or coercion. Indeed it may amplify them and so working methods need to be planned, tested, evaluated and developed with the young researchers. One advantage of working in a research team with them is that there are is more time to talk, than there can be with child research subjects, and to turn problems into opportunities for children and adults to increase their skill and knowledge.

Conclusion: working with child researchers

The growing literature on children as researchers suggests that children are an under-estimated, under-used resource. Just as research about women has become far more insightful because women are involved as researchers, the scope of research about children could be expanded by involving children as researchers in many methods, levels and stages of the process. Children are the primary source of knowledge about their own views and experiences. They can be a means of access to other children, including those who may be protected from strange adults. The novelty and immediacy of children's research reports can attract greater publicity and interest in using the findings than much adult research does. Doing research helps children (perhaps disadvantaged ones especially) to gain more skills, confidence and perhaps determination to overcome their disadvantages than adult researchers working on their behalf could give them. Adult researchers have noted their surprise at child researchers' competence, and their plans to do more complicated work and work with younger children in future. Adult researchers frequently emphasise the value of listening to children, and this point is made more effectively when children can express themselves through doing and publicly reporting their own research.

Today, new political and funding pressures promote research by children. NGOs follow international guidance that their own research and services should be 'child-focussed', strongly and directly influenced by children, in accordance with the 1989 UN Convention. Governments, having ratified the Convention, should also be doing so through all their agencies. As more children's research is published, the dangers of ignoring their views (Cooter, 1992), and the benefits of working with them become more obvious. Funding bodies like the ESRC and Rowntree expect researchers to work closely with user groups, from inception to the implementation stages of research. Although this has potential disadvantages when powerful commercial or professional bodies prevent researchers from being adventurous, independent and critical, consulting children as the largest 'user group' of research affecting them can redress inter-generation imbalances of power. As the examples have shown, work by young researchers can open up new directions for research, and respect children's rights.

A booklet for young people 'whose sense of adventure and idealism is the only hope for more voluntary action in future against unsavoury acts towards man and Nature' quotes Gandhi: 'My humble occupation has been to show people how they can solve their own difficulties' (Oza, 1991). NGOs work with child researchers to improve understanding of children's lives, their interests, concerns, capacities and needs; to see them in the context of their family, community and society; to demonstrate children's ability to take part in research, their competencies, ingenuity and originality. They show how children can have unique and valid perspectives; to inform social policy (SCF, 1997:2-5) and to help towards solving their own difficulties.

Finally, the vogue for excluding as researchers people who are personally affected by the research topic for fear of bias has largely been superseded by respect for researchers with inside knowledge. All the arguments proposed by feminist and Black researchers supporting their research about their own group also apply to children. Postmodern deconstruction of subjectivity sees it

> 'as a product of power rather than its author; and [sees] agency as power's way of acting through the individual. ...[Power] is not unitary and zero-sum, but diffuse, constantly changing and plural....The selves we think are fixed and unitary are actually unstable, fragmented and contradictory. [Postmodernism] can thus potentially help us to look at changes and tensions (such as that of oppressor/oppressed) in who we understand ourselves as being....The act of deconstruction is political, as it exposes the intricate operations of power that constitute subjectivity' (Aziz, 1997).

In research about children, a key question is: how can adults get beyond the power constraints and expose the intricacies of power in relations between adults and children? Research by children with its emphasis on addressing power before during and after the formal research stages, with its use of potentially partly subversive games, and its expansion beyond thinking into shared doing, can offer useful approaches. When I interview disabled or Black people, I find that although we discuss difficulties that arise from discrimination, we are also partly papering over the cracks of these very differences in order to try to hold equal respectful relationships. In contrast, when Black researchers talk with Black interviewees their common experiences of these differences enable them to explore them much more deeply (Scott, 1998) and this shared exploration can apply to children's research about children.

Notions of childhood vary, and we can't easily transfer experiences, structures and attitudes across cultures. Child researchers tend to be more adventurously involved in poor and war-torn countries, in adult work as well as research; they cannot simply set up restaurants in the UK as they can in New Delhi. The limitations in Europe and north America for research by children seem to lie less therefore in children's (in)competencies, than in adults' limiting attitudes, in constraints, and concern for protection over participation rights. However, the evidence of child researchers' activities and achievements, as well as their research findings, are likely to promote more respectful and realistic appreciation of their abilities as social actors.

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