

Research Article

Engaging Children in Research: Exploring Children's Geographies

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ABSTRACT

This research article emphasises how researches are conducted on children and the way they are excluded in the engagement of research process by establishing the mis/fact that children are minor and naïve and cannot be the trustworthy narrator of their contexts and circumstances. However, on the other hand, recent trends in childhood studies include the participation of children in the studies which matter to them. The exclusion of children's narratives and experiences created a gap to understand children from their viewpoints. Children's experiences of places and context explain how that particular geography has influenced the phenomena/issue (to be researched).

Keywords: Children, Research, Experience, Exclusion, Geography

INTRODUCTION

Engaging children in research is not only a debatable issue but also an ethical question. Is it appropriate to have children as a sample for any research? Isn't it the researcher's eagerness to push the children to get better results by exploring these little ones? But there are researchers who have worked with children and brought reliable and trustworthy evidence. Working with children is now recognised and accepted, especially where the researcher seeks to understand the experiences and perspectives of children from their point of view. We, as researchers, need to value their version of the story (event). There are many unheard voices that are covered by adult narrations. To get to the real (unadulterated) experiences, we need to peel back those socially constructed adult

versions of events. All those issues where children have their own experiences and observations should not be ignored, thinking that they are naïve and innocent, incapable of thinking properly, interpreting and articulating properly. Why do we need well thought and well-articulated (adult) views which do not reflect the thinking of that child? ‘...much of what is said about children and childhood is not really about children and childhood at all’ (Hillman in Jenks, 1982). Exclusion of children and their geographies from the research conducted about and on children somewhere creates a gap to critically understand them and their issues. Interestingly, one needs to argue that the systems, institutions and spaces have not ensured complete safety to our children so it creates all the more reason to converse with them so that their articulation about the meaning of those spaces is well registered. One requires to redefine the research ethics while engaging the children in research by redefining the so called silent spaces which otherwise are not explored due to various derivatives like age, gender and other existing social inequalities.

No one can be better than children to talk about children’s issues if they have related experiences. Yes, here certainly comes the question of the credibility of those experiences. And this is where it becomes necessary to talk about sensitive research methodology, which is also child-friendly. Most commonly used methods while working with children are participatory, non-participatory observations, interviews, talks, focussed group discussions, more creative methods such as visual methods; drawing, mapping and photography, drama, storytelling and role-plays to gain insights into their experiences, thought and ideas of the phenomena and events. All of them have proven effective and ethical.

The child in context is important to understand in any research engaging children. Children’s relationship with their physical and built (constructed) environment, beyond the home, school and playground, and how they ‘see the world’ around them are equally critical to understand. Each one of us interacts with the space (geographic) differently, which helps in developing perspective about people and places.

...what children see are structures which constrain them. These may include the adult values imprinted on the physical and built landscapes in which they live or the social constraints of the adult gaze. We argue that research on the lives of children should not just be reported for its own sake, but should lead to outcomes which encourage empowerment, participation, and self-determination consistent with levels of competence. (Mathews and Limb, 1999)

Research that reflects children’s understanding of the phenomena or events through the lens of adults does not reach the depth of the research point. The adult’s own thinking dominates on that topic/issue, and children get excluded from the whole research process.

So, will this be considered research done on children? And how can their findings help to create better situations for children? It can be suggestive, but there would also be possibilities to have gaps in doing it in the right way. 'Childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling; nothing is more foolish than to try and substitute our ways...'. Rousseau in *Emile: or A Treatise on Education*, book II from age 5 to age 12 emphasised that adult interference to treat them or expect them to behave like adults is wrong. He further states that 'Nature would have them children before they are men'. Similarly, excluding children from the research related to them has been a big lapse if we keep continuing to count the adults.

ENGAGING CHILDREN IN RESEARCH

Understanding children from adults' lenses have not helped much to reach the core, especially in the study of children in crises. The stereotypical argument to describe the child as a minor or inexperienced is keeping away from the researchers to access the first-hand data. Moreover, ethical and moral dilemmas associated with researching young children keep the researchers majorly relying upon the families and associated adults to fetch the information about them. Handling children itself is a sensitive issue than working with them on their issues, especially the sensitive ones, would be a challenge. Sensitive child-centric and friendly methodology needs to be employed for acknowledge that some studies demonstrated the possibility of successfully engaging preschool-aged children in projects seeking to gain insights into their thoughts, ideas, and experiences of the world' (Carr, 2006). The most critical aspect is to acknowledge the children and their experiences as equally respectable and resourceful sources to be explored.

Debbie-Noble Carr of the Institute of Child Protection reviewed the literature and found some of the revealing and encouraging aspects that the '**diversity of topics successfully investigated with the active participation of children**'. This included research on sensitive issues such as:

- Out-of-home care and child protection systems
- Homelessness
- Crime
- Perceptions of problems and coping strategies
- Illness and pain
- Poverty
- Wellbeing
- Young caring
- Respite services for children with a disability

- How children negotiate independence in rural Bolivia
- Violence against children
- Children and risk

There is ignorance to engage children even where they are the victim of the circumstances or part of the vulnerable population and need to be researched upon to understand their thought on it. They are kept in marginalised positions, and predominantly adults play the role to talk about their (children's) experiences. Carr's review of literature is a testimony for all the researchers keen to explore children's experiences, good or bad, and to recognise that the children have their own thought process on their experiences and they too have the distinct abilities to express those experiences relating with their own circumstances and positions at the event/incident. Researchers intend to know the same, but it won't generally come from the adult version of a child's narration as expected.

Punch (2002) very aptly states, '**Ways of seeing children affect ways of listening to children**'. The sensitive issues related to children (some of them are mentioned above) demand patient and conscious listening and researchers' understanding of children as research entities. In the last decade, not only the sociology of childhood has broadened, but the research of childhood also has expanded where exploration is being done with the children, not on the children (only). Just to mention a few names here, Christensen & James, Corsaro, Qvortrup, Connolly, Kellett & Jones, Freeman & Mathison, Emma Renold is some of the researchers in the last few years who have come out with new dimensions in childhood studies. They not only talked about the child-centred research methodologies but also tried to research upon the un/less touched areas about the children and their childhoods. Adults as guardians and gatekeepers still play an important role to know about children. It is not wrong to be like this at all, but not by making children non-existent.

There are researchers who have explored more innovative and creative ways to engage children in research. It is seen that qualitative methods like participatory observations, talks, narrative takings, focussed group discussions are quite effectively instrumental with children. More creative expressions like drawings, photography, diaries and journal writings are also being explored and practised for research with children. A lot of work has also been done on research settings that prove to be more effective and less threatening for them. Research setting has its significance as some children find it comfortable talking in private and some in the home setting or some in a crowded place. In most cases, the school setting is the most preferred place for children to talk about themselves. Researchers are making efforts to identify better sensitive methods, tools, and settings to minimise the feeling of fear amongst children, especially if the research is trying to know such aspects which have been painful for the child as well as frightening.

Engaging children in research demands more time, patience, sensitivity, regard and respect to their views in a non-judgmental and non-prejudiced manner so that the autonomy of thoughts can be maintained. The researchers will also have to work and effectively train themselves on their research skills and attitude to do an effective investigation.

EXCLUSION OF CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHY IN RESEARCH

It is about incorporating child and geography perspectives into the research (James, 1990). James further states that there has been little research undertaken that critically examines the ways in which children's lives, experiences, attitudes, and opportunities are socially and spatially structured. Their socially and spatially constructed meanings of any event or phenomena do not get recognition. There are social and environmental forces that may influence and impact children differently, and they may have a construction /meaning of reality (experience).

'Children's perception ...reflects interests which diverge from those of adults. Keller (In Philo, 1997), for example, points to the common perception of adventure playgrounds by children as exciting locations, while adults view them as eyesores. What ... may seem to an adult to be a safe, pleasant enclosure, for a child may be boring lifeless space' (Hill and Michelson in Philo, 1997). If we recount our own childhood spaces and places and objects which had different importance and meaning altogether for us than they had for adults, then we would be able to relate with the environmental cognition of children and their use of space.

There are many places that are guarded by the authorities, and adults and children are expected to behave in a certain way, but in spite of all these supervisions and restrictions, children construct their own spaces. These spaces have social significance for them, probably the only space where they have freedom and autonomy of thoughts and actions. For example, at the backside of the school or washroom generally, nobody goes, and most of the time, those areas are not clean also. But it is being observed that group of boys and girls making clumps and having fun and fight there. A Junkyard or backyard is one of the favourite places for some children to have their mischievous games.

CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHY TO RESEARCH SENSITIVE ISSUES RELATED TO CHILDREN

Sensitive issues related to children can be explored, taking children's geography as one of the critical factors. For example, if the study is to explore the construction of sexuality/ies amongst children or if it is to understand the experiences of abuse from their own

point of view, then the lived experiences of those geographies would not only help to understand the space or location as a factor for occurring of specific event but also for the construction of the particular type of identity. The interpretation of various spaces may not be the same as what adults attached to them. A dark room game is a hide and seeks game played for amusement, but for a ten years old child, that dark room was a place where she was abused sexually (Gupta, 2019). In another instance, in the same research study, the balcony of his flat (house on the 3rd floor) was the entire world for a lock and key child of age ten years where he learned so many life experiences by watching others playing in the ground and walking in the park. In another narrative, a child (11 years) explains that a computer in a cybercafe has helped him explore his sexuality, which was not considered normal by others in society. Many more such occasions where children say that a crowded market or road during the day becomes unsafe and frightening as soon as it becomes deserted at night. How has the place reproducing fear and taboo can be understood by the explanations given by the adults to that, but constructions developed by the children about the surroundings also depend on their interactions and experiences with that and also how do they 'express, imagine and interpret it in their own terms' (Sapkota and Sharma 1996 cited in Carr, 2006).

A glimpse of their neighbourhood geography can be seen in the accounts of the children. They observe people and places and talk about them. They might not seem necessarily important to us as researchers, but if the mention is made in any description, then it is important to pay attention. It may be overtly or covertly related to the issue or event which the researcher intends to explore or investigate. This information can be obtained from detailed conversations or observations with children. Or maybe a walk to that place would help to understand the criticality of the geography for the purpose. There is a possibility of a little bit of fabrication of fact, which may sound artificial too, but the researcher could attempt to gather the information with the skill of research.

Due to various life situations and circumstances, children develop an understanding of places. Children who are from conflict zones and shifted to refugee camps in some other places and on the other hand, children who have this place as their domicile may have completely different experiences and interactions with the place, and their experiences might have played a critical role in forming a perception about that place. These experiences do not allow to come out of that understanding until other kinds of experiences are added to it to change the perception. In such a situation, it may be necessary for a researcher to understand the importance of place and location as a critical factor in causing that event to happen that way. Geography of war, place displacement, and shelter needs to be explored from children's point of view to work towards providing them with a sound and secure environment.

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LANDSCAPE: A CRITICAL DIMENSION TO EXPLORE

Do we find the difference between the 'places for children' and 'children's own places?'. Rasmussen (2004) examined 'How spaces such as homes, schools, and recreational institutions have been created by adults and designated by them as places for children'. Further to investigate, Rasmussen provided cameras to children to take pictures of the spaces they find more engaging for them. Apart from the adult designated places, they also clicked the photographs of some informal and hidden places, often unnoticed by adults and called redundant space or waste place (Ward, 1978). The book *The Child in the City*, written by Colin Ward in 1978, explores the everyday spaces of children's lives and how do they do space utilisation for their purposes.

In this, he examines the everyday spaces of young people's lives and how they can negotiate and re-articulate the various environments they inhabit. As a storyteller, he shows the creativity and uniqueness of children (five to sixteen years old) and how they cultivate 'the art of making the city work'. He argues and shows with different stories that through play, appropriation, and imagination, children can counter adult-based intentions and interpretations of the built environment. (www.childinthecity.org)

The discussion of places for children and children's places is very well brought in the notice that children do reappropriation of certain informal places for themselves which Ward entitles 'Colonising small spaces'.

This is the face of the city that "we" (adults, grownups) do not often see, or perhaps do not let ourselves see: it is the face of grubby nooks and crannies; of those 'small spaces' where so many 'small people' find things to do away from the normal authority of parents and other adults.

This book is an insight to understand the importance of landscapes developed by children for them and how those are different from the ones which are designated by the adults for them. Social geographies of the places also interact with the individuals to make their construction and interpretations about the place. Pain et al. (2002), in their study on crime, asked children to *mark key points on their timeline where changes could have made a difference to their experience of an incident*. The key points which are related to the places and landscape would help the researcher to explore further to understand how have the lived experience/s of that particular space/place has contributed or worked as a catalyst. Guided walk of the child's neighbourhood is also considered a useful technique to employ. Similarly, many researchers used photographs to access children's private worlds. Butalia (2013), in his book, writes about the mapping of negative landscape elements, which was the compilation of lived experiences of children about sexuality.

CONCLUSION

The ‘otherness’ of children and their geographies, the impossibility, and inappropriateness of subsuming them within studies of the adult world, is itself made a justification for opening up a new field of geographical inquiry. (Philo, 1997)

Children’s understanding of the physical landscape and how it has helped them to socialise in a particular way (*subjective world of children*, Hogan, 2005) have a lot to reveal. A place that has less or no supervision by adults and is free from any kind of interference and places that are designated and are under supervision and surveillance might have different explanations to understand the relationship of usages of these spaces by children. Studies done in the area of children and crime can help to understand the interpretation of those landscapes from the point of view of the abuser and abused. How the same place becomes the reason/factor for vulnerability for the victim and other to show power, especially when they both are children. The intersectionality of age, gender, sexuality, class, caste, social/economical/political/cultural/ethical positions put a different analysis before us.

United Nations Conventions for Child Rights (United Nations, 1989) Article 12 emphasises children’s right to participation, ‘State parties shall assure to 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’. A global consensus was shown that as soon as ‘children can express a preference about a matter affecting them, they have the right to form an opinion, make it known to others and have it considered’ (Melton in Morrow, 2011).

Inclusion of children in creating knowledge about them is an urgent priority as they should be treated as ‘agentic social actors’ (Hardman, 1973), and working with them could reveal aspects of social lives which is not found in conventional ethnographies (adult-centred). While working on children’s ethnographies, their geographies do also play a significant role in determining the occurrence of those events and also of happening it that way. Berry Mayall (1994) critically comments that ‘... how far we adults fall short of implementing children’s rights, what children’s own experiences and discourses tell us about their understandings of the right and wrongs of their daily lives and what resistance children make to the childhoods proposed for them’. If the researcher determines in advance what is important for child-related research, then we will not be able to know what was really important for children.

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