
9 Young People as Researchers

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Objectives

- To explore the concept of young people as researchers and to critique the scope and limitations of current research practice in this area
- To identify methods for advancing the notion of young people as researchers and to establish the ethno-participatory model as a methodological innovation
- To consider the practical organisation, design parameters, training and research roles implicated in a youth-focused approach
- To explore the possible contrasts between researcher and adolescent interpretation of findings
- To summarise the limitations and scope of the ethno-participatory approach.

Introduction

The vast choice of qualitative and quantitative methods and approaches that are commonly found to resource the capture of data surrounding the actions, behaviour, attitudes and perceptions of children and adolescents have been already explored. Throughout the text, but particularly in Chapter 3, reference has been made to the qualitative research field of ethnography (and more specifically 'Participant observation'). Ethnography, in the context of children's research is a largely underused research approach and this may be because this style of study is located in the child's naturally occurring setting. This data collection

168

is conducted by methods which capture the child's social meanings and ordinary, everyday activities. This requires the participant researcher to be directly involved in the setting and, in some cases, the activities themselves. There are a number of issues that arise as a consequence of employing this approach most notably an ethical approach to researching with children and the philosophy of the researcher.

The role of the researcher in ethnography facilitates a systematic collection of data that remains free from predetermined (or positivistic) order (see Chapter 3 for a discussion on methodology). Whilst the range of methods used in ethnography can be employed in a variety of research approaches, for example, in-depth interviews and diaries, ethnography is distinguishable by its proximity to the research field and desire to explore and uncover the 'lived order' of the respondents. The notion of proximity to the research setting, in this case the child's everyday life, is the salient issue posed by this particular field of research, and one that is addressed specifically in this chapter.

Ethnographic studies that require the researcher to immerse her/himself in the community under investigation as an active participant remains impossible for the adult researcher wishing to gain the benefits of this style of research when the study is with young people. Employing adolescents or children as researchers may overcome this barrier, however, and the first part of this chapter explores this concept further. A teen-centred model for organising this type of research is proposed and the practical considerations for employing such a design are considered. The chapter concludes by identifying the interpretive attributes, research roles and ethical issues associated with a youth-focused study.

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The range of limitations and caveats attached to the research methods and techniques explored throughout this book are largely as a result of the physical and psychological distance between the researcher and those with whom they are researching. Morrow and Richards contend that 'the biggest ethical challenge for researchers working with children is the disparity in power and status between adults and children' (1996: 98). For example: 'when kids talk to researchers, they assume the adult is a kind of teacher and that the questions are, again, about getting it right or being wrong. Overcoming that mindset is crucial (Roper, 1989: 17).

Ethnographic research, through various forms of participant observation, aims to research the lived order of the respondents without the influence, shaping or reconstruction produced by introducing extraneous and traditional research tools. Techniques that employ participant observation through long-term immersion are considered to be important and are increasingly popular methods

for social scientists aiming to unearth a complete picture of the topic under consideration and to develop 'thick descriptions' of social behaviour (Elliot and Jankel-Elliot, 2003). Observational data is attractive as it affords the researcher the opportunity to gather 'live' data from 'live' situations and allows for an understanding of the context of the research and the discovery of ideas or issues the respondents might not talk about freely in interviews (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Ethnographic research could involve the participation of parents or gatekeepers to help record events over a period of time. This might be particularly valuable when attempting to observe critical moments during the period of socialisation (see, for example, Nutbrown, 1999) although the power imbalance inherent in this approach and parents being considered in some cases as 'agents of surveillance' (Danby and Farrell, 2002) may influence the data collected.

A point to note is that, depending on the aims and purpose of the research study (and in some cases the reason for conducting the research) it may be important to be able to generalise the findings of the study and thereby utilise a set of methods that remain objective and external to the respondent's immediate context.

From a qualitative perspective, the aim of any credible piece of exploratory research is to unmask the genuine motivations, reasons, interactions and influences that help to explain and assist in our understanding of the behaviour and actions of the respondents whether the focus is on educational development, health awareness or social behaviour. Children and adolescents are increasingly aware of research and its purpose and, if you have followed the ethical path to completing your fieldwork as outlined in Chapter 2, young people will also recognise and comprehend your role as a researcher. Inevitably this 'research awareness' increases as a result of the perceived demographic and psychographic distance felt by the child or adolescent towards the (adult) researcher. Indeed, in an effort to circumvent this research awareness (and the influence it may have on the data collection) some researchers may be tempted to try and 'become' an adolescent (see for example Llewellyn's 1980 unfinished study on teenage girls). However the prospect of this approach succeeding is remote and may as a consequence create a greater perceived distance than would have been achieved by simply behaving as normal adult researcher.

It has been argued that the inseparability of research and researcher is an essential and desirable characteristic of social science studies and that the methodology which underpins the research design is as much to do with personal values as it is to do with rigour and 'hygiene' in the research process (Clough and Nutbrown, 2002). However, researchers have also sought to limit the extent to which this inseparability pervades the whole research process and indeed promote the notion of natural separation (Pole *et al.* 1999). Natural, in this sense, means that there are normal and desirable differences between an adult world from which the research aim ordinarily originates from and the child's world we are seeking to understand in more depth. Child or youth-centred research promotes the

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