Listening to children’s voices:  
Child-centred participatory research tools for sociologists

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Abstract
The final decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of what has been called the ‘century of the child’. Sociologists also recognised an emerging new paradigm in which childhood was understood as socially constructed and children themselves as active social agents in their own and others lives. Alongside this, childhood itself is now understood as just one variable of social analysis. This paper argues the value of employing child-centred participatory research tools that allow the voices of children to be heard directly rather than via their adult guardians. It briefly outlines the current understandings in the sociological study of childhood and the relevance of studying children’s lives in late modern societies. It then describes two participatory tools that have successfully collected data with children in disadvantaged single-parent families, and finally tackles some of the ethical issues that may be deterring researchers from pursuing study in this area.

Introduction
The final decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of what has been called the ‘century of the child’. Society placed ‘the child’ and ‘children's interests’ at the forefront of legal, welfare, medical, and educational policy and practice and in 1989 the United Nations declared the Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in which provision, participation and protection were the keystones (James & Prout, 1997, pp. 1-8). Sociologists also recognised an emerging new paradigm in which childhood was understood as socially constructed and children themselves as active social agents in their own and others lives. Alongside this, childhood is itself now understood as just one variable of social analysis alongside the historical, cultural, geographic and economic diversity that characterises this social group: there is not one universal childhood, but many different and particular childhoods (Corsaro, 2011; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002).

As such, there has been an increase in the attention paid by sociologists to children’s lives; however, in Australia we have generally been slow when compared to the UK and parts of Europe, to design research that explores the nature and experience of childhood through the eyes of children themselves. This paper argues the value of employing child-centred participatory research tools that allow the voices of children to be heard directly rather than via their adult guardians. It briefly outlines the current understandings in the sociological study of childhood and the relevance of studying children’s lives in late modern societies. It then describes two participatory tools that have successfully collected data with children in disadvantaged single-parent families, and finally tackles some of the ethical issues that may be deterring researchers from pursuing study in this area.
Childhood in late modernity
Current understandings of children and childhood highlight the need for sociologists to study children’s social relationships and cultures from their own perspectives. Children are found to be actors in the construction of their own lives, the lives of those around them, and the societies they inhabit (Corsaro, 2011, p. 4; Mayall, 2002, p. 142). Childhood itself is revealed as a social construction that ‘depends on the predispositions of a consciousness constituted in relation to our social, political, historical and moral context’ (James et al., 1998, pp. 26-27). This implies a plurality of diverse constructions. Childhoods are variable and intentional – there is no universal ‘child’ with which to engage. We need, then, to ask: how is childhood different from or related to other social groups? How is its conception and nature changed in different cultures and times? How do children affect societal change and policy responses and how are they affected by them? (Qvortrup, 1991, p. 33)

Research Paradigm and Design
So as to gain an understanding of how social change impacts on children’s lives and to allow the voices of children themselves to express their views and the deeper meanings they attach to their experiences, qualitative studies that employ ‘child-centred’ approaches will prove useful (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012, p. 130; Mauthner, 1997).

When designing research tools to use with children they should allow for a wide range of skills, preferences, and modes of expression; not rely on writing or reading; and provide an opportunity for further informal conversation and exploration of ideas. Empowering the child and minimising the authority of the researcher will enable the building of a relationship of trust. The researcher should not presume or impose preconceived adult notions about what are important issues to the child, but assist them to a deeper exploration of their lived experiences and the meanings they attach to them. Securing the rights, safety and well being of the child is paramount. In keeping with the need for a methodology that allows for a deep understanding of the perceptions and constructed meanings of young people (Davis & Hill, 2006, p. 127), participatory methods of data collection present a useful option.

Participatory research techniques have been used widely in development work where the term ‘Participatory Rural Appraisal’ (PRA) is commonly used to describe research in the constructivist paradigm where the emphasis is on the visual representation of ideas. It is commonly employed in rural communities where there are low levels of literacy and where the collection of data cannot rely on the reading and writing skills of the participants (Davis & Hill, 2006; Moen & Erikson, 2009; Ridge, 2006). Although the research has traditionally been used primarily with adults, it is particularly suited for children as it takes account of the varying abilities, cultures, life experiences, and preferences of the participants and can include drawings, social mapping, flow diagrams, and stories (Davis & Hill, 2006; Edwards, 2010; James et al., 1998; Punch, 2002; Ridge, 2006). In conceptualizing children as a minority group, PRA techniques are particularly useful as they assist in transforming power relations between adult researchers and children and allow children to ‘set the agenda and describe their own reality’ (Davis & Hill, 2006, p. 132).
Participatory Research Tools
In a current research project investigating the impacts on children of recent changes to welfare payments in Australia, the following research tools where employed with conversations to collect data from children from 8 years old.

The ‘My Week’ tool aimed to facilitate children in their thinking about the important events and relationships in their daily lives and how they spend their time (James & Christensen, 2008). Children were asked to consider an average week in their lives (but it could be a particular aspect of their life for example: food and mealtimes or recreation) and to show/tell through the use of the tool how they spend their time.

After explaining briefly the purpose of the activity the child was given the sheet of paper with a circle drawn in the centre and a selection of drawing and writing implements. They were then asked to use the circle in whatever way they found most useful or meaningful to represent their week with no way being right or wrong, better worse: in this way the specificity of the activity was deconstructed (James & Christensen, 2008, p. 159).

The children used the circle in a range of ways including timelines, graphs, and drawing frames. Whilst this research was being conducted the researcher sat at the child’s level - joining in a role as the ‘least-adult’ (Silver, 1994, p. 110); participating along-side the child, prompting the sharing of ideas, encouraging the participants and inviting them to provide further information, interpretation or depth of meaning through conversation (Nieuwenhuys 1996:5 cited in Davis & Hill, 2006, p. 132). These conversations can then be audio recorded.

I sometimes do gemstone club but only every month…This is a pink Quartz, they ask you to close your eyes and what do you feel and with the purple quartz I feel like everything in my head is gone and I am not rushing or anything.

I kept on feeling a little scared…because when she lost her job she didn’t have a lot of money and then she was struggling and how we would get things… and I kept on thinking bad things...

(Emily, 9 yrs. old, 2013)

…it’s stressful because my mum used to drink wine and then I’d go to sleep thinking, ‘Oh, what is she going to do?’ because I’d always hear her falling over in the night and I couldn’t sleep.

(Steven, 11yrs)

The second tool, social mapping, was designed to show connections between places and people in the child’s life. Again the purpose of the activity was described and children shown some examples of other social maps. Using a large sheet of blank paper or whiteboard and assorted drawing utensils, children were asked to create a ‘map’ to show the places and people in their lives, modes of transport, and the extent
and frequency of mobility (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, pp. 137-138). Participants could use as much creative representation as they wished in constructing their social maps. Again the researcher participated actively with the child and engaged in conversation.

‘These tools allow children to participate in the research process by creating images for themselves which are about themselves…and they work to mediate the communication between the researcher and the child’. They act to concretized abstract notions of relationships, time and space, they provide another medium of communication other than verbal and they allow children to offer commentary both on the product and the modes of producing it (James & Christensen, 2008, p. 160).

So I sometimes I go to my dads…I was meant to go on mother’s day but I stayed at mums…because I wanted to spend mother’s day with mum. …and he doesn’t pay the child support…he sometimes helps out with book club…mum drives me and we have this swapping place...

(Emily, 9yrs, 2013)

She works at school days, but if we are on holidays we just go to my friend’s house. If I am sick I usually just stay home…I would just talk to mum on the face book since I don’t have the phone here.

(Sean, 12yrs, 2013)

I go to my grandmas. My dad lives in Brighton and my grandma lives in Greenacre and that’s like a 40-minute drive at least. Sometimes he grabs me and picks me up. I stay at my grandma’s and I visit and sometimes if I get lucky I stay there for two to three days and then I go back to my grandmas.

And they are creepy because they put bars on the windows, my grandma…it looks like a prison. I suppose to protect form robbery, but I m not sure if they have ever been robbed. It is a very unsafe area; my mum told me all about it, but my grandma denies it. But I know that it is very unsafe, I just feel it is unsafe.

(Steven, 11yrs, 2013)

**Ethical Issues**

Applications to conduct research with children, particularly those in vulnerable situations can ‘raise the red flag’ with ethics boards and researchers alike. However, research of this nature ‘can enable a hidden, marginalized population to have their voices heard. It can deliver findings about children’s lives that can inform otherwise adult-centric research, policy and practice initiatives’ (Morris, Hegarty, & Humphreys, 2012). In conducting research with children the following ethical considerations are fundamental:

- It is not ethical to expose children to risk through an investigation that carries no benefit for that child. Interviews about painful subjects should be performed in accordance with the principle of ‘least harm’;
- Care must be taken to avoid exploiting the power imbalance inherent in relationships between children and adults. This imbalance may be exaggerated by differences in class, gender and other factors;
Researchers must be alert to the fact that questioning children may sensitise them to issues of which they were previously innocent, thereby exposing them to further risk. It may also yield information that places the researcher at risk;

- Be aware that these children may be bearing a heavy burden of feelings they cannot usually express. Giving them an opportunity to tell you about their lives may open floodgates of emotions. You may have to take responsibility for, and deal with, difficult situations that may arise during research;

- Child participants should be assessed for potential risk prior to being accepted for the research. Children who are deemed to be high risk due to trauma or highly emotional events or family circumstances should not be included in the research.

- An agreement about confidentiality should be reached - children’s secrets should be kept, except where their safety or well-being is at risk

- Options for support and follow-up counselling should be provided where children may experience trauma or emotional disturbance as a result of the research.

(Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Morris et al., 2012; Stern & Porr, 2011, p. 44)

Ethical concerns become more problematic around consent. Consent for children cannot be seen in the same way as that for adults (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007). We should also be seeking ‘assent’ and providing for informed dissent noting that ‘a child’s failure to protest should not be interpreted as consent or assent’ (Bessell in Redmond, 2008, p. 19). The term “assent” recognises the role for a child that lies between no involvement in discussions and full decisional authority of the parent. There is no requirement for a signature. Assent is not authoritative, and in itself is not sufficient to authorise participation in research. Assent should not be confused with informed consent, or with autonomous decision-making. Agreement can come without understanding (for example, a child can agree to a blood test but not understand the implications of the procedure). The underlying value of assent is respect for the welfare and interests of the child/participant and should only be used in conjunction with parental consent (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007)

‘Dissent’ is an aspect of assent giving the child the opportunity to say ‘no’ to research participation. Dissent gives recognition to a child’s objections and to the desire to refuse to engage in or withdraw from research. The researcher must be aware at all times of explicit as well as implicit verbal and behavioural signs that may indicate a child’s unwillingness to continue (Spriggs, 2010). They must ensure the child fully understands their rights to dissent or withdraw from the research at any stage and should be certain that no third party, including the child’s parent is pressuring them into giving consent against their wishes. Informed consent should only be sought from the parent for their child, on the proviso that the child has already given their assent: parental consent cannot over-ride the wishes of the child should a child not agree to participate.
In conclusion, there is a clear need for sociologists to explore the impacts of social change in children’s lives and how they understand and interpret their lived experiences which is often very different from adult interpretations of children’s lives. The recognition of the socially constructed nature of childhood itself necessitates that sociologists understand the role children, as well as adults, play in this process. The methodological challenges posed by conducting research with children can be overcome by the selection of research tools that allow children to engage with the topics of interest in ways that don’t rely on reading or writing, cater appropriately to their age and development, and provide an opportunity to build relationships of trust that lead to meaningful conversations. The ethical considerations, whilst not insignificant, can be managed with thoughtful consideration and attention to the welfare of the child as paramount. Working through these issues is worthwhile and will lead to more successful outcomes for the child and researcher during the data collection process. The results can lead to the collection of deep, rich data that provides a window into the lived experiences of a group whose voices are rarely heard in research. I would argue that this is an essential first step to gaining a better understanding of how social policy and social change in children’s lives may have bearing across their life course and to creating better-informed policy around areas that impact on children’s lives.


