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Research with Young Children: Contemplating Methods and Ethics

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Abstract

The United Nations Rights of the Child mandates the right of children to express themselves and participate in decisions that affect them, while receiving care and protection from adults. However, children's voices have not often found their way into research. Concerns about their powers of communication and cognitive abilities have restricted children's participation. Empirical evidence suggests that if one appropriately engages children in the information-gathering process there is no reason why their perceptions and thoughts should not be regarded as competent. However, methodologies that require researchers to adopt a role of passive observer potentially pose ethical dilemmas. When working with children ethical dilemmas can be minimised by taking on the role of a participant adult. The participant adult role for the researcher is entirely congruent with the cognitive and social needs of children to participate meaningfully in research.

Introduction

Planning a qualitative study with reception children aged five to six years presents the planner with particular difficulties and dilemmas. The study in question is one that seeks to explore five-year-old children's perceptions of body image and physical identity and how they develop and evolve over 12 months. The intention of the study is to develop an understanding of how children construct their beliefs and conceptual understandings of

an ideal body type. The study also aims to explore the character traits that are associated with various body types and how these ideas are formed.

While there have been studies that explore these ideas with older children, there is a dearth of research with children of five and six years of age. Studies that do exist have tended to require children to respond to a set of questions that adults have decided are important (Grogan, 1999; Kay, 1996; Tiggemann & Pennington, 1990). Whether children perceive these issues to be important has not been explored nor has the underlying mechanism that creates these ideas.

In reviewing and deconstructing the literature of previous qualitative studies with children of a like age, two basic issues emerge. Firstly, there are very few studies with children of five years of age that utilise a qualitative methodology. Further there is no evidence in these studies to support the inclusion of very young children of this age group. Explicitly, there is no evidence that five year old children can reasonably be expected to possess the cognitive and communication skills needed for meaningful qualitative enquiry. Secondly, two studies (Amos Hatch, 1995; Keddie, 2000) which used authentic qualitative research in early childhood settings both encountered ethical conflicts and dilemmas. In both cases the researchers had witnessed children confronting forms of emotional abuse by the children's peers. In both cases the authors identified an ethical dilemma. The dilemma can be described as a conflict between the author's perceived need to collect data without intervening and the need to protect children from harm. In both cases the ethical dilemma remained unresolved.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly it seeks to examine and challenge the rationale for the omission of children's voices in studies that relate directly to children. Further, it seeks to examine the empirical evidence surrounding children's abilities. Secondly, it seeks to present an argument that questions the assumptions embedded in methodologies designed for use with adults which, when applied to research with children, may lead to ethical dilemmas.

Qualitative Enquiry with Children: Perceived Issues and Empirical Studies

The right of children to express themselves and participate in decisions that affect them, while receiving care and protection from adults is mandated by signatory countries to the United Nations Rights of the Child (Hill, Laybourn, & Borland, 1996; Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke, & Craig, 1996; Smith & Taylor, 2000; United Nations, 1989). This principle, while not new in social research, has not greatly influenced research pertaining to children (Alderson, 2000; Christensen & James, 2000; Feldman, Feldman, & Goodman, 1988; Gollop, 2000; Mahon et al., 1996; O'Kane, 2000; Scott, 2000; Smith & Taylor, 2000). Hill et al.(1996) concur and, further to this, express the view that in instances where children have been included, the study tends to be the pilot stage of a larger study which seeks to produce standardised and quantifiable results. Research with children tends to be a process that is devised by adults, applied to children with results

interpreted by adults, generalised and presented as a theory of childhood (Hill et al., 1996).

Proponents of children's abilities to participate in research often cite psychologists' theories of intellectual development as a major impediment (Alderson, 2000; Hill et al., 1996; Spencer & Flin, 1993; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). Cognitive theories such as Piaget's theory of intellectual development and Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Bransford, 1981; Eggen & Kauchak, 1997) portray children as incomplete adults and focus on children's inabilities and weaknesses. Spencer and Flin's (1993) seminal study on children's abilities identified three specific objections pertaining to children's cognitive, social and communication skills that represent the basis for children's perceived inadequacies (Smith & Taylor, 2000; Spencer & Flin, 1993). Explicitly, identified concerns relate to the reliability of children's memories, to allegations of egocentricity and to suggestibility.

In controlled experiments it has been identified that age is a factor in the memory capacity of children (Spencer & Flin, 1993). In free recall experiments children are asked to remember as many details as possible of a staged event. Younger children typically report a smaller quantity of evidence but what they do recall tends to be accurate (Spencer & Flin, 1993). However, in instances when children are asked specific questions, there tends to be an increase in the likelihood of errors. This trend is exacerbated by asking more complex questions (Carter, Bottoms, & Levine, 1996; Spencer & Flin, 1993). Errors tend to take the form of omissions or facts forgotten, rather than being incorrect in detail. On standard memory tests, children perform better than adults when being asked about information where they have a greater knowledge than their adult counterparts (Spencer & Flin, 1993). Scott (2000), Woodhead et al. (2000) and Bransford (1981) agree that children's responses improve in reliability when they are questioned about matters that are relevant and meaningful to them. Further, Bransford (1981) found that children are able to remember events in temporal order when the events are familiar. The quality and quantity of responses can also be enhanced by developing a supportive, accepting environment that fosters a feeling of 'well-being' (Carter et al., 1996; Powell & Thomson, 2001).

A person's age is but one facet of a range of variables that need to be taken into account when determining the competency of the respondent to recall accurately (Spencer & Flin, 1993). Two other factors, 'stress' and 'lapse of time' have also been presented as obstacles to children's memories (Spencer & Flin, 1993). Studies that consider the effect of 'stress' on children's memories make use of stressors that occur naturally in children's lives and produce ambiguous results (Spencer & Flin, 1993). The ethical nature of subjecting children to stress makes conducting formal experiments of this nature untenable, casting doubts on the rigour and veracity of the results (Spencer & Flin, 1993). In terms of the competence of children, it is important to note that there is little evidence to suggest that stress decreases the effectiveness of children's memories.

Adults' and children's memories have been shown to deteriorate with the passing of time (Mayall, 2000; Spencer & Flin, 1993). In terms of children's memories, traumatic events can be recalled accurately by children up to four years after the event, while staged events can be remembered by children as young as six years of age for up to five months (Spencer & Flin, 1993). Longer periods of time do not tend to produce inaccurate memories but rather, again, a loss of detail (Spencer & Flin, 1993). In terms of children's inclusion in research one could argue that, as the effect of time on children's memories impacts on the quantity of information, the necessity for listening to children is even more imperative (Mayall, 2000).

Spencer and Flin (1993) describe egocentricity as taking two forms, egocentricity as a moral weakness as a lack of concern for the impact of one's actions and egocentricity as a cognitive weakness, an inability to appreciate another person's point of view, and a selective memory for information that has personal significance. Egocentricity, in both of these forms, would suggest an inability in children to appreciate the impact on other people of lying, or in other words, the importance of telling 'the truth'. The issue that needs to be investigated is the suggestion that because of their egocentricity, children are more likely to tell lies than are adults.

To tell the truth means to report the facts or to recount events as one perceives them (Spencer & Flin, 1993). Perception and memory are subjective processes (Spencer & Flin, 1993). The delineation of what constitutes a central event from a peripheral event in any given situation is entirely in the eye of the beholder, irrespective of the beholder's age (Spencer & Flin, 1993). By the age of three to four years, children understand the essential difference between the truth and a lie. However children tend to report the information they perceive as central and omit what they see as peripheral (Spencer & Flin, 1993). This is entirely congruent with the aims of research where one is attempting to discover and understand another's perception.

When children do lie it tends to be in an effort to avoid the perceived threat of punishment (Spencer & Flin, 1993). At any age, lying tends to be more of a response to situational factors than a specific character trait (Spencer & Flin, 1993). The importance of establishing a supportive, accepting environment that fosters a feeling of well-being would seem to be not only important in helping children remember accurately but also in increasing the likelihood of being told the truth as it is perceived (Carter et al., 1996; Powell & Thomson, 2001). Kefyalew (1996) claims that we are all egocentric, for the whole of our lives. Spencer and Flin (1993) and Scott (2000) concede that children and adults do tell lies but state that there is no evidence to support a notion that children tell more lies than adults. The evidence suggests that, provided they are immersed in an environment that is supportive and encouraging, children can, and do, report their observations and feelings no less faithfully than adults.

The concept of suggestibility as a criticism is an issue which, like telling the truth, is pertinent both to adults and children (Mahon et al., 1996; Spencer & Flin, 1993).

The contention that children are more susceptible to suggestion than are adults is an obstacle to research with children. Further, children's susceptibility to suggestion makes working with them problematic in terms of research (Spencer & Flin, 1993). Vulnerability to suggestion can be thought of as a construct of one or both of two unrelated sources, the cognitive abilities of children and the perceived power differential' between the researcher and the child (Mayall, 2000; O'Kane, 2000; Spencer & Flin, 1993; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000).

Spencer and Flin (1993) note that in controlled experiments, children as young as four years of age can be resistant to suggestion and leading questions. The level of susceptibility is influenced by several factors. For example, it is known that children are less susceptible when the information sought concerns unambiguous questions concerning central events (Hill et al., 1996; Powell & Thomson, 2001; Spencer & Flin, 1993). However, when one is interested in a child's thoughts it is the child's perception that discriminates and decides which events are central and which events are peripheral, not the researcher's (Spencer & Flin, 1993). Determining the events the child perceives as being central is critical.

Studies on suggestibility in children demonstrate that repeated questioning and asking for more detail leads to a higher probability of incorrect responses (Hill et al., 1996; Powell & Thomson, 2001; Spencer & Flin, 1993). The rationale presented is that by having the question repeated, the child concludes that the previous response was incorrect and so is inclined to offer a different response (Spencer & Flin, 1993). The key to accessing the greatest amount of accurate information requires the uncritical acceptance of what the child has to say as an indicator of perception rather than as a 'right' or 'wrong' answer. It is important that verbal encouragement is based on their participation and not based upon the quality or the quantity of the information proffered (Powell & Thomson, 2001).

The evidence presented demonstrates that children are resilient to suggestion. However, as with adults, children are fallible in certain situations. The effect of 'time' or 'delay' in talking to children has already been mentioned earlier in this paper. Although it has been demonstrated that children can be quite resilient to suggestive questioning up to one year after events, it is also clear that the greatest amount of accurate information is most likely to be obtained after the least amount of time has passed. It should also be noted that where a child is subjected to multiple interviews, particularly where the intention is to exacerbate any susceptible tendencies, then some considerable success can be shown after four interview sessions(Spencer & Flin, 1993).

Ethical considerations

As Spencer and Flin (1990, p.287) state in relation to children's testimony, 'their cognitive skills, particularly those relevant to giving evidence (e.g., perceiving and remembering people, places and events) may have been undervalued.' The evidence

presented in this paper suggests that children are able to demonstrate their true abilities only when the interviewer adopts child-centred strategies that take into account the cognitive, communicative and social needs of children. However, the implementation of methods adapted only to these needs may involve the researcher in an ethical dichotomy between participation and protection (Jamison & Gilbert, 2000).

The protection of children, perceived as vulnerable and open to exploitation by researchers (Mahon et al., 1996) has, at least in Australia, been the domain of ethics committees (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2001). Issues of informed consent, the appropriateness of children as research subjects, the research methods and potential for physical, emotional or psychological harm are considerations that are assessed before permission is given for research to commence (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2001). It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss ethical issues at this level, but rather at the level of ethical dilemmas that face researchers in the day-to-day gathering of data.

Keddie (2000) describes one such ethical dilemma when reflecting on an ethnographic study concerning children's toys. Keddie's (2000) research intention and subsequent methodology was based on minimal intervention and yet her role as a responsible adult demanded that on occasion she intervene to prevent physical harm. However, during a focus group interview one member of the cohort was the target of verbal stigmatisation by other members, constituting a form of non-physical abuse (Keddie, 2000). Keddie (2000), on reflection, identifies this position, of intervening only in instances of physical abuse but not in instances of psychological or emotional abuse, as being inconsistent and inappropriate. The ethical dilemma faced by Keddie (2000) was caused by a conflict of interest between the study utilising methodologies based on axioms of non-interference in opposition to the higher duty of care that is incumbent on researchers when working with children and demanded by society (Smith & Taylor, 2000; Tapp & Henaghan, 2000; United Nations, 1989). Keddie (2000) believed she was faced with choosing between the integrity of her data and the emotional/psychological safety of the children within the participant cohort.

It is quite conceivable to suggest that this type of dilemma is commonly encountered when working with children. Paradoxically, however, it is not commonly discussed in the literature. The reason for this can only be speculated upon but a plausible explanation might be a research culture that lauds non-interference and objectivity in data collection. The ethical dilemma courageously discussed by Keddie (2000) is inherent in research when it is conducted on or with children. In ad-hoc discussions with fellow researchers this is often found to be the case. A pragmatic approach that views children as being capable of participating in the research process, but simultaneously needing protection, is perhaps one way of dealing with this dilemma (Jamison & Gilbert, 2000). However, this solution does not take into consideration the possible impact on the subsequent actions of children in the cohort of researcher intervention to protect, nor does it consider the inevitable criticism of data validity that is

sure to follow such interference. One way of avoiding this dilemma is to revisit the research methodology being employed and adapt the methodology at the theoretical framework level. Applying this notion to Keddie's (2000) ethnographic study would require revisiting the conceptual idea behind an ethnographic study.

Patton (2002, p.81) describes the foundational question of an ethnographic study as asking "[W]hat is the culture of this group of people?". The primary data-gathering method used by researchers is commonly participant observation where the investigator is immersed in the culture being studied. Where this culture consists of adults, the investigator is immersed in whatever is the adult culture being studied. However, if childhood is thought of as a culture, there are certain problems with researcher immersion in a cohort of children. Adults stand out physically. Adults also play an integral leadership role in the lives of children. As Mayall (2000) notes, to think that children do not recognise that an adult is among them or watching them is to discredit the intelligence of children. Further to this, it seems unlikely that children's behaviour will not be affected by the presence of an adult as one of the responsibilities of adults is to ensure the safety of children. Hence, the intention of an ethnographic study (Patton, 2002) of researcher immersion is not feasible in a cohort children, nor would it be appropriate even if it were possible. It is natural and normal for adults to intervene; indeed, it could be argued that lack of researcher intervention when a child's safety is threatened is not only unethical but is also highly unrealistic in terms of the realities of the social system of childhood.

If researchers are to work with children, they must use methodologies which support children's intellectual and social abilities. The methodologies must also allow the researchers to uphold their social and ethical obligations by protecting children in the eventuality of physical, psychological or emotional threat. These research considerations and associated ethical dilemmas can be addressed if researchers, instead of pretending to be children (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000) or taking on the questionable role of non-interfering adults (Amos Hatch, 1995; Keddie, 2000), recognise that adults are part of a child's life. It is more appropriate to enter the research environment as a participating adult able to adopt the role of a sensitive, empathetic and caring adult. A relationship based on trust and mutual respect can be developed allowing the researcher to uphold the ethical imperatives when working with children. This approach is also entirely consistent with the social, intellectual and communication requirements of children if they are to participate in research.

Conclusion

Adopting methodologies that value the voices and thoughts of children may be useful in developing an understanding of the issues that affect them and in developing a more sophisticated understanding of childhood (Keddie, 2000; Kefyalew, 1996; Mahon et al., 1996; Mayall, 2000; Scott, 2000). As Spencer and Flin (1993) conclude, providing that children are engaged in the information gathering process appropriately, there is no

reason why their perceptions and thoughts should be regarded as anything other than competent. The major barriers to children's voices being heard in research can be overcome by understanding that children can participate in meaningful ways if the research environment is one in which they feel safe, supported and valued. The research environment must be seen through the child's eyes. Strategies that support not only children's abilities but also the social structure in which they live, must be adopted.

Children have a right to feel safe. The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (2001) stipulates that researchers must provide for the physical, emotional and psychological safety of the children with whom they work. Children do not live in a society separate from adults; rather, children live with adults in a symbiotic relationship. The involvement of children in research requires the adoption of roles which allow them to recognise this relationship. When working with children, the intervention of an adult to prevent harm is a socially-natural and expected role. This view is fundamentally different to the view that perceives researcher intervention as a dilemma. Not only is intervention ethically sound, but to do nothing creates an environment which is not authentic. When researchers embrace this role they place themselves in a position to reduce the influence of ethical dilemmas which are inherent in the use of methodologies which were not designed primarily for use with children. Simultaneously they also confirm and support the normal environment for the children they study.

The conceptual ideas expressed in this paper do not limit research with children in any way. Rather they ask that researchers consider the implications of methodologies that may not support the needs of children or the necessities of ethical intervention. The methodology adopted must be congruent with the needs of children and it must also allow the researcher to act as an adult participant with clear and defined roles concerning the well-being of the participants.

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