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Author(s)	Joan Marian Fry
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BOOK REVIEW

Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices

By P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), 2000, London: Falmer.
ISBN: 0-750-7094-X (pbk)

Review by Joan Marian Fry

In recent years, several monographs dealing with methodological issues within the context of childhood research have been released. One of these, Pia Christensen and Alison James' edited collection, *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* (2000), makes a significant contribution to this area. The book, with contributions from several reputable 'child' or 'childhood' scholars, represents a paradigm shift in childhood research. It is premised on the belief that children are social agents: they are *actors* in the meaning-making of their everyday events. The authors challenge the idea that children and adults constitute separate social categories and that adults do research *on* children. In their opening chapter, the editors argue that children can be appropriated and misrepresented by adult researchers. What comes through strongly in the book is the claim that all children have a right, and are competent to be involved in their own representation in the research process.

In an early chapter, Hendrick chronicles the history of Western childhood research and, in so doing, brings readers to an understanding that a researcher's own standpoint (his/her set of beliefs) is crucial in shaping knowledge production and, from that, how a researcher's views of childhood dictate the ways she/he does childhood research. This is an underlying assumption in the text and

reinforces a pattern shown in Woodhead and Faulkner's analysis of changes in knowledge beliefs and knowledge construction within child psychology. Also central to the book is the notion, put by Qvortrup, that there is no singular state of childhood: childhood is a social phenomenon that is constructed in diverse cultural contexts. In other words, the field is constituted by multiple childhoods. Jenks argues that it is because of this diversity that childhood ethnographic studies produce a rich literature of childhood and children. Although the paradigm shift in childhood research—to "the new sociology of childhood"—was initially the product of small qualitative studies such as these, the new focus has since been taken up by mainstream research institutions. Indeed, across this book are representations of a range of research approaches, all adopted in attempts to understand children's world views. A notable twist is that agencies which design and administer national quantitative surveys in Britain now see children as a critical consumer mass and have consequently sought ways to understand household issues from children's perspectives.

This is not a methods text; in fact, the authors often challenge practices accepted for research among adults. Their position is that there is no recipe for research with children and so context governs methods used. Each author, or author team, approaches childhood research in a different way, but almost all use qualitative methods. Writing from experience, all identify specific issues for studying the life worlds of the children of their particular interest. The contributors mostly provide rich illustrations from their own lives as childhood researchers, and these are refreshingly honest. As a result, the book offers a wealth of practical suggestions to both novice and experienced researchers in this domain.

A number of ideas for reducing methodological difficulties are to be gleaned from this book, not the least of which is the point that children are often factored out of large-scale societal studies, or their 'views' provided by adults. In contrast, the authors claim that children are the best sources of information about their perspectives, and research instruments need to be specifically designed or adapted for this population. Since children are adept at impression management and are also used to having their perspectives ignored, researchers must make it very clear that it is *the children's own views* that are being sought.

The chapter by Scott has several ideas for modifying research techniques used with adults to render them appropriate for children, such as carefully choosing an interview setting to suit the particular children in order to enhance data quality, but the author's main point is that researchers need to understand how children

respond to the research process in order to be more effective in doing research with children. In her chapter, Mayall claims that the best way to understand children's "lived worlds" is through fieldwork, even though it can be fraught with relationship difficulties. Myall provides many ideas for doing fieldwork with children, who are ever aware, and often distrusting of the power of the adult status of researchers. Particularly useful is her elaboration of building trust with young people in order to enhance data collection.

Another line of argument to be followed through the book is that understanding children's lived worlds is more important than defining and measuring the variables that might shape their lives. If it is accepted that children are the best sources of information about their social world, then the quality of the adult researcher-child participant relationship and its impact on validity and reliability are important considerations for child/childhood researchers. O'Kane describes many participatory data-gathering techniques that involve child-participants in interpreting their reality to the researcher. Many researchers believe that children are unable to elaborate on abstract ideas and so limit their enquiries of children to their understanding of concrete phenomena. Alison and James, in their second contribution, refute such conventional wisdom and provide useful examples for examining relatively abstract constructs with children.

Gathering childhood data is not always straightforward, for although a child agency might endorse a child/childhood study, such approval does not necessarily provide access to children's data. Indeed, even if parents and prime carers provide informed consent on behalf of minors, there is still no guarantee of gaining the data. Researchers must build relationships with the children they intend to work with. Readers who do field work will identify with the researcher's anxieties exposed in Corsaro and Molinari's chapter which deals with issues of entry, acceptance, and their ongoing negotiation with preschoolers.

Doing research with children challenges preconceptions about doing research and about children, so it is important for researchers to attend to their biases. Another specific perspective on childhood—of children with disabilities—is examined by Davis, Watson, and Cunningham-Burley, who highlight the need for a "bracketing interview" before starting field work in order to track researcher bias and illustrate that field work often involves compromise about role negotiation.

Working for a child service agency, Roberts is the only contributing author not researching in an academic context. An advocate of children's rights, she argues for application of the contemporary Western ethic that research should benefit

those participating in the study, and highlights potential ethical issues in building trust. Ethical issues are further expanded in the concluding chapter, where Anderson focuses on the participation rights of children. She presents children as potential co-producers of data and discusses stages at which they can be actors in research as well as expected levels of participation. However, she also warns that if children are given some control over the research agenda, their critical questions can be threatening to adults.

All in all, this is a useful book: it challenges the idea that age is a “natural” factor of research design and that investigators can assume particular types of responses from children to any data gathering technique. It certainly gave new meaning to the comment made by a fourth grader during my field work:

“‘We’re making funny shapes and faces’ – Write that in your book.”