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The Continued Importance of Research with Children and Youth: The “New” Sociology of Childhood 40 Years Later

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Abstract

This chapter presents the broad themes of this special issue by introducing the contributions and connections among the chapters in the volume. Recent theoretical constructions of childhood have positioned children as social actors resulting in a growth of child- and youth-centered empirical research. Yet, there is a continued importance for researchers to discuss ethical issues that arise in research with youth, contend with the competing constructions of children as social agents and in need of protection, and explore innovative methodological strategies used in research with youth.

Keywords

children and youth, qualitative research, research ethics, agency, methodological innovations

Disciplines

Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies | Sociology | Theory, Knowledge and Science

Comments

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Introduction

The Continued Importance of Research with Kids and Teens: The "New" Sociology of Childhood Forty Years Later

Melissa Swauger, Ingrid E. Castro, and Brent Harger

Volume 22 of *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth* (SSYC) explores some of the methodological issues, strategies, and innovations essential to conducting research with children and youth. In the last four decades of the "new" sociology of childhood, theoretical constructions of childhood have positioned children as social actors, resulting in a growth of child- and youth-centered empirical research, a deepened understanding of ethical approaches, and a burst of innovative research methods (Christensen & Prout, 2002). The chapters in this volume utilize qualitative methodological approaches that continue to challenge how we conceptualize, treat, and work with kids and teens as producers of knowledge.

Even though the "new" sociology of childhood is not particularly new at this point within the larger, multi-disciplined umbrella of Childhood Studies, researchers continue to struggle with issues of access to children, continue to search for strategies in theorizing children and childhood, and continue to create innovative methodologies with children. The fact that the email address we established for this project, researchingkids@gmail.com, was readily available indicates just how far we still need to go in making kids and teens central to our research endeavors and, indeed, our shared consciousness.

The need for such conversations is pressing, since contemporary frames of childhood that position youth as capable agents compete with past discourses of paternalism and protectionism (Moore, 2014). Even though children's right to be heard has been mandated (UNCRC), protectionism and surveillance are a part of children's "everyday social reality" (Christensen & Prout, 2002, p. 489). As Fothergill and Peek (2015) observe, most children's settings are "monitored by vigilant gatekeepers" who fear child victimization (p. 228). The modern organization of children's 'leisure' time ensures children's days are highly structured, closely supervised under the authority of adult rule-makers (Corsaro, 2005). In an "audit society" (Cooper, 2001), those who serve youth in institutions – including teachers and social workers – are required to quantify interactions with children. The use of social media enables the tracking of children's everyday moves (Buckingham, 2000), and corporations control child consumers through advertising (Consuming Kids, 2001). Moreover, Corsaro (2005) argues there is a tendency to hold "certain children personally responsible for the complex social and economic systems and problems that so dramatically affect their lives" (p. 227).

Acquiring access to children's worlds can be especially difficult for social science researchers (Fothergill & Peek, 2015). This hyper-protection and surveillance of youth impacts those who wish to gain access to children for qualitative and, to a lesser extent, quantitative studies. Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) serve as *the* ethics clearinghouse, with (1) prioritized focus on the physical, rather than social, well-being of youth, (2) processes that assume all research is similar to clinical trials and medical research, and (3) centralized goals of protecting universities from litigation. IRBs' paternalistic protectionism of children creates contradictions and frustration among many social scientists because of their restrictive views toward researching children.

Therefore, defining children as a protected, vulnerable class of people means that their voices are frequently left out of research. This is problematic because, as noted by “new” sociology of childhood researchers, children and childhood are important topics of study and researchers should approach children as *the* experts of their lives. The very basic tenets of the subfield known as the “new” sociology of childhood argue for practices that recognize children have the autonomy to define, explain, and shape their worlds.

The Organization of the Volume

The chapters in *Section I: Methodological Issues: Ethics, Locations, and Roles* examine ethical qualitative research that goes beyond fixed institutional guidelines. Qualitative child researchers are frustrated with IRBs’ inconsistent implementation of rules and regulations, IRBs’ lack of comprehension for the intricacies of qualitative methods, and IRBs’ failure to understand the diverse populations children represent and the diverse locations children occupy. In this section, researchers argue for ongoing ethical reflections in our projects because research dilemmas are unpredictable. Throughout their work, researchers must be explicit about their intentions, make participants comfortable exercising their agency, and remain cognizant of their comparative social positions of power.

The chapter by *Brent Harger and Melissa Quintela* examines the influential role IRBs have over child qualitative researchers. Adult-centered and protective in nature, IRBs have considerably more control over research than most other gatekeepers, yet there is great variation in the implementation of IRB rules across universities, time periods, and populations. Because many IRB members influence research methodologies, it is imperative they have familiarity with qualitative methods and an understanding of participants’ cultural backgrounds.

Cultivating trust can be difficult for researchers who are temporarily involved in the lives of youth participants. Additionally, depending on the context, gaining parental consent may not be feasible. *Vanessa R. Panfil, Jody Miller, and Marin Greathouse* examine the use of youth advocates who work with and serve youth to assist researchers with accessing diverse and hard-to-reach populations, developing rapport with youth participants, and mediating the assent/consent process. The authors draw from their empirical work to present the challenges of developing meaningful collaborative partnerships with community organizations, youth advocates, and youth participants.

Scholars conducting research in schools confront various levels of gatekeepers, whose requirements for access and data collection can be contradictory and rife with ethical dilemmas. *Anne Scheer* explores how school-based ethnography relies on a strong research design and, perhaps more importantly, adaptability and flexibility on the part of the researcher for authentic interactions with youth. Using preschool as a fieldsite, *Heidi M. Gansen* illustrates how the role of the researcher is in constant flux, demonstrating the need to negotiate an understanding of the researcher's role with adult gatekeepers and children. *Melanie Jones Gast* explores the issues of subjectivity and representation while conducting research in high school, and how researchers can help to influence and support underserved youth in their future endeavors. These contributors illustrate how we can create mutually beneficial relationships with gatekeepers (particularly in the school setting), the power children have to resist and defy adult researchers, and the need for constant reflection on our ethical responsibilities to participants.

Representing children as social actors is considered one of the most important theoretical developments in the sociology of childhood (James, 2009), because doing so deems children's lives worthy of inquiry, recognizing children for their "value in the development of social

theory” (Bluebond-Langer & Korbin, 2007, p. 245). The chapters in *Section II: Methodological Strategies: Theory, Agency, and Voice* challenge researchers to reconceptualize how we think about agency and voice, moving beyond understanding children as participants and agents in research toward research practices that are carefully and genuinely crafted to engage youth as co-producers of knowledge.

Jessica Clark and Sara Richards suggest we cannot assume that “cherished conceits” – youth participation in research, the agentic child, and elevation of voice – imply ethical practice, because these very methods can reproduce paternalistic and unequal power relations between researchers and youth. Instead, researchers must interrogate (1) whether children’s right to participate is genuine or if it places untold expectations on youth, (2) if participation is truly emancipatory or if adults have ultimate control over child participants, and (3) what it means to “give voice” to child participants, especially if those very same children want to be silent.

The ways child participants respond is a product of how they see themselves in the context of where research takes place. *Ingrid E. Castro and Sally McNamee and Sam Frankel* urge researchers to reconceptualize how we think about children’s agency and voice by paying attention to the research setting. *Castro* explores the home as a research site and theorizes the agentic strategies children use to assert themselves in research interviews of parents, even when they are not invited. *McNamee and Frankel* call for creative data interpretation that explores how data is produced in contexts where children have almost no space for agency. Research settings can serve as spaces for children to challenge and resist adult-established structure in the social world.

Equally important, researchers should reflect on their own positions in research settings. *Kristin Turney, Britni Adams, Emma Conner, Rebecca Goodsell, and Janet Muñiz and Ana*

Campos-Holland propose agency may mean something different for youth who are exceptionally vulnerable because of social inequalities. In their work with children of incarcerated fathers, *Turney and colleagues* suggest researchers are responsible for ongoing methodological reflection while working to establish rapport with youth. Rapport and respect can be fostered by maintaining awareness of the circumstances facilitating children's participation, and perhaps directly responding to participants' and their families' needs (Fothergill & Peek, 2015). *Campos-Holland* makes an important point about the need to racialize the study of children and youth in order to gain enhanced understanding of peer cultures through the use of better-formulated theories and methods.

Researchers are increasingly utilizing new child-centered methods to ensure co-participation, whereby the authentic voices of children can be heard. *Section III: Methodological Innovations: Visuals, Media, and Technology* explores the use of multiple, creative methods that resonate with children's "contexts, concerns, and routines" (Fothergill & Peek, 2015, p. 229). These techniques go beyond traditional narratives found in observations and interviews to show how the use of digital, visual, and artistic strategies can produce rich data.

Henry Zonio explores what it means to engage children as experts in research. Through a combination of focus groups and drawings, *Zonio* shows that when unequal power relations are broken down, children can actively and creatively shape their experiences and interpretations of church. *Tricia McTague, Carissa Froyum, and Barbara J. Risman* present inventive, multiple-method research techniques to enhance data collection about race and inequality from youth. Likewise, *Margaret Ann Hagerman* uses youth-centered visual research methods to reduce adult-researcher power hierarchies and encourage children to speak openly about race and inequality.

These innovative, child-centered techniques empower youth to share knowledge, while at the same time provide flexibility in the research encounter so children can influence project protocols in creative ways.

Today, young people live in a world where internet and technology shape their everyday lives. As *Alecea Standlee* argues, accessing the online worlds where youth spend significant amounts of time can provide us with new data about youth cultures. *Standlee* finds that researchers who craft responsible, ethical online methodologies can research children with little to no participant risk. Innovative uses of technology for data collection can bring together traditional observation and interviewing techniques to better understand children's consumption of digital media. Through participant-driven photographs and home visits, *Ana Nunes de Almeida, Diana Carvalho, and Ana Delicado* illustrate the growing appeal of child-centered digital methods that empower youth to share their own interpretations of living with and using technology.

As *Gary Alan Fine* reminds us in his *Afterword*, much has been gained but some has been lost since the onset of the “new” sociology of childhood. This is due to the heightened framing of children in contradictory ways (i.e., in need of protection while being social actors), leading to increasingly structured methodologies mandated by IRBs for use with children and youth. Ongoing critical, ethical reflection that goes beyond fixed institutional guidelines, recontextualization of children's agentic participation, and the development of innovative and creative methods are conceptual constructs with which we must continue to engage. In fact, many authors' contributions could easily be placed in another section of this volume, as *Researching Kids and Teens* is an interrelated work comprised of many different, equally valid, approaches that stem from the same goal. It is to this collaborative, shared space we now turn.

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