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Developing a research relationship with children and young people over a fourteen year period

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Background

I discuss a recently completed study that I have undertaken with a group of nine young people from the ages of three through to seventeen, drawing on ethnographic methods. Qualitative longitudinal research studies of childhood and adolescence are rare despite the enormously important contribution they can make to theoretical understandings of changes over the lifespan (Holland et al, 2006; Henwood and Lang, 2003). In particular they can help us to critique 'infant determinism' and understand the complexity of links between early childhood experiences and later outcomes.

Research Questions

The qualitative longitudinal study discussed in this paper was undertaken with the very specific aim of exploring the children's construction of a sense of self throughout their school lives, in order to bring a much needed grounded perspective to current debates about the importance of a personal identity, and how it is created over time. Findings relating to this specific focus are reported elsewhere (Warin, 2010; Warin and Muldoon, 2009). In this paper I address the interesting methodological questions inherent in undertaking research with a small sample over such a long time span. How did the young people agree to participate? How did child consent interact with parental consent? How did the nature of consent change over time? How was mutual trust established? What rewards were there, if any, for these participants? How was my own ability to gain insight into their interpersonal lives influenced by my ongoing relationship with them? Whilst these interwoven ethical and methodological questions can be seen as particular to this very specific type of methodology they also generalise to other studies with children and young people since they turn a spotlight on the relational aspects of research processes.

Methods

In tracing the key methodological influences on this study I draw attention to recent debates about the positioning of children in research. The last decade has seen a huge rise in the number of books about the use of research methods with children, as researchers have attempted to meet the challenge of accessing and amplifying child voice. A theme within many is the need to reverse the traditional approach to children as the objects of research and begin to position them as fellow researchers, a move that can be linked with the growing practice within national government and local authorities in the UK to consult children. Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) for example call for a reversal of research practices that have been characterized as working on children to practices that can be presented as working with children.

My study has attempted to embody this new approach through a group of methodological practices that I characterize as 'intermittent ethnography'. Ethnographers aim to understand their chosen setting, from the inside, attempting to understand how those in the chosen field of study make sense of their world (Wolcott, 1999). Ethnography is therefore associated with the enterprise of giving 'voice' or of revealing hitherto hidden aspects of the culture of a group, and is a particularly appropriate approach for understanding children's cultures and social networks (Jenks, 2000).

The first phase of the research when the children were aged between three/four years old and six/seven years old included observational study in the pre-school and school settings as well as interviews with teachers and carers and with parents in the child's home. During the latter phase, from ages twelve/thirteen through to age seventeen, the main method was to conduct intermittent 'interviews'. These became two-sided conversations as a mutual trust and rapport became established. These conversations incorporated a range of prompts for discussion of identity and

change such as video extracts from pre-school, photographs, school reports and projective techniques.

Frame

The methodological concept of researcher reflexivity has provided a lens through which I have viewed my developing relationship with the young people. A number of qualitative researchers have argued for this value, and claimed that when the researcher writes their own self into their ethnography they bring a much greater authenticity to it. This value is based on the tradition of feminist writers who have argued that what passes for objectivity in 'hygienic research' is inauthentic, a way of writing the personal and subjective out of the research process. Harding (1993), for example, advocates 'strong objectivity' turning the traditional positivist value for objectivity on its head in order to emphasise reflexivity. An important component of this research attribute is the recognition and disclosure of the emotional aspects of the research experience, a dimension I draw out in a discussion of my developing relationship with the participating young people

Research findings

The methodological questions considered in this paper produce a number of conclusions which will be of use to other researchers undertaking qualitative research with children and young people. Firstly, issues about consent to participation in research are far from straightforward when working with children. I conclude that the rather bland idea of 'informed consent' is more appropriately transformed to one of 'continuing consent' (Lindsay, 2000) together with a continuing right to withdrawal. Secondly, working with parents as gatekeepers to consent can be problematic when parental agendas lead to coercion of children's participation and when parental accounts swamp their children's. Finally and most importantly, the methodological issues confronted throughout this study have reminded me that all research is relational and that the stories the children have told me about their lives, and their selves, are the joint constructions of our interactions.

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