Qualitative Research with Children: The Perspectives of Elite Researchers

Carmel Smith & Sheila Greene

Children's Research Centre, TCD
15th Anniversary Celebration,
December 2010

Introduction

- The ways in which researchers position themselves in relation to children in qualitative research within child psychology and the broader childhood studies paradigm was the topic of this qualitative study.
- The continuing prevalence of a positivist-empiricist approach within psychology was acknowledged while focusing on the challenges to developmental psychology in recent decades from within and outside the discipline, some of which have led to an increase in the use of qualitative methods (Greene and Hegar, 2005).
- In psychology the growth of socio-contextual theories of development from the 1970s onwards converged in certain key respects with new ideas about children and childhood being espoused across the social sciences and humanities (Greene, 2006).
- Initially associated with the ‘new’ sociology of childhood (James and Prou, 1990), the field of childhood studies has evolved to incorporate a growing number of disciplines and perspectives under the multi-disciplinary term ‘childhood studies’ (Woodhead, 2003).
- The aim of the study was to investigate the perspectives of leading children’s researchers in this changing research environment.

Method

Sample

- 30 pioneers and opinion leaders from a range of disciplinary backgrounds working within the field of childhood studies in Europe and North America.
- Academic researchers with at least ten years experience of qualitative research with children and a minimum of five book or international peer-reviewed journal publications.
- The response rate in this study was 95 per cent.

Method, Procedure & Analysis

- Semi-structured face-to-face elite interviews were conducted.
- Participants were asked to both describe and reflect upon their research experiences.
- Close attention was paid to ethical issues, particularly confidentiality and anonymity, consistent with the literature on researching academic elites (Wiles et al, 2006).
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim and a shared approach to data ownership was taken whereby participants were invited to edit their transcripts and review the use of direct quotations (Gillham, 2005).
- Data was manually retrieved. A combination of deductive and inductive coding techniques were used to prepare the data for visual display, thematic analysis and refinement of themes (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).
- Internal validation of findings was pursued using the constant comparative method of analysis (Silverman, 2000).
- External validation was sought by including multiple analysts and incorporating a ‘member checking’ exercise (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Results

The Biography of the Researcher

- Participants’ own childhood experiences, their relationships with children in their families and social networks, their personal political motivations and perspectives were important in shaping their approaches to children’s research.
- The personal biography of participants combined with their disciplinary background, professional training and fieldwork experiences to inform the ways in which participants positioned themselves in relation to children in their qualitative research relationships.

"I think the question of what we bring from our own experience of childhood into those encounters is interesting one and one that people don’t really talk about very much." (RP2)

Conceptualizations of Children and Childhood

- Participants’ conceptualizations of children and childhood were pivotal to the ways in which they positioned themselves at each stage of the research process.
- A minority of participants (17 per cent) aligned themselves to particular philosophical and theoretical stances whilst the vast majority (83 per cent) drew on a number of frameworks.
- The adult-child dichotomy was at the heart of conceptualizations of children and childhood. It was referred to by 80 per cent of participants.

"...once you start marking out a group as essentially different you have made a reification of that group, a stereotyification of them, that is not helpful to either children or child researchers. Those who draw such a distinction are still seeing children as a group separate from humanity and they are working with this deep-seated, modernist separation of childhood from adulthood and they are just taking that for granted." (RP1)

The Artistry of the Researcher

- None of the participants in this study accepted a clear divide between quantitative and qualitative research. All saw the practice of qualitative research skills as an inextricably linked with the personal qualities and creativity of the researcher in forming mutual relationships with children.
- The learning and development of qualitative research skills were assessed as akin to learning a craft whereby the artistry of the researcher is integral to research practice.

"It is important that you get skills and you learn the craft in a research methods course but the artfulness of it, that makes it into a masterpiece, that is what you are putting into it. It is partly to do with being systematic and partly to do with just creativity: thoughts, ideas being empathetic and so on." (RP2)

Rigour and Reflexivity

- The concept of rigour was not controversial. It was unequivocally assessed by all participants as fundamental to high-quality qualitative research.
- Reflexivity was the most contentious topic in the study.
- There was widespread confusion between the terms ‘reflective’ and ‘reflexive’.
- A continuum of positions ranged from those who considered reflexivity an integral element of research to those who viewed it as symptomatic of self-indulgent, off-task research practice and more about the researcher than the researched.
- Relevance of material covered, how adeptly reflexivity is incorporated into research thinking and the quality, style and content of reflexive writing received particular criticism.

"Reflexivity is very important in kind of problematising science in psychology for instance. (However, there is) a whole body of reflexive practitioner literature and actually, I don’t really know what concept of reflexivity they are working with!" (RP1)

Conceptualizations of Children and Childhood

- Participants’ conceptualizations of children and childhood were pivotal to the ways in which they positioned themselves at each stage of the research process.
- A minority of participants (17 per cent) aligned themselves to particular philosophical and theoretical stances whilst the vast majority (83 per cent) drew on a number of frameworks.
- The adult-child dichotomy was at the heart of conceptualizations of children and childhood. It was referred to by 80 per cent of participants.

"...once you start marking out a group as essentially different you have made a reification of that group, a stereotyification of them, that is not helpful to either children or child researchers. Those who draw such a distinction are still seeing children as a group separate from humanity and they are working with this deep-seated, modernist separation of childhood from adulthood and they are just taking that for granted." (RP2)

The Artistry of the Researcher

- None of the participants in this study accepted a clear divide between quantitative and qualitative research. All saw the practice of qualitative research skills as an inextricably linked with the personal qualities and creativity of the researcher in forming mutual relationships with children.
- The learning and development of qualitative research skills were assessed as akin to learning a craft whereby the artistry of the researcher is integral to research practice.

"It is important that you get skills and you learn the craft in a research methods course but the artfulness of it, that makes it into a masterpiece, that is what you are putting into it. It is partly to do with being systematic and partly to do with just creativity: thoughts, ideas being empathetic and so on." (RP2)

Conclusions

- The personal biographies of individual researchers were shown to be fundamental to the ways in which researchers positioned themselves in their qualitative research relationships with children.
- The assumptions that researchers imported into the research process and the extent to which they acknowledged and worked with the inevitably subjective element in qualitative research, varied considerably.
- Understandings and interpretations of the adult-child dichotomy were pivotal to how researchers conceptualized and theorized children and childhood.
- Participants from the discipline of psychology acknowledged problems with mainstream approaches to research in developmental psychology. They also believed that child psychology had been inaccurately portrayed as a consensual sub-discipline in some childhood studies literature.
- The topic of the emotional labour of the researcher was identified as significant given the anticipated level of vulnerability and trauma reported by 53 per cent of participants. This was not associated with age, disciplinary background or number of years of experience.
- Unifying threads throughout the analysis included the use of the term ‘children as people’, the need for the researcher to both trust children and to trust the research process and the importance of qualitative research being seen to be a systematic, transparent and accountable process.
- This study highlighted the need for methodological literature in the field of childhood studies to further investigate and illuminate the influence of the biography of the researcher in childhood research.
- The research concluded by arguing that a stronger body of theoretical literature is required to underpin the diverse range of qualitative approaches currently being employed in research with children.

For more information contact: smithc4@tcd.ie

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding provided by the Office of the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs, Ireland.