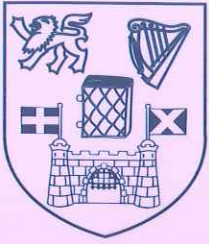# The Children's Research Centre

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Researching Children's Experiences: Qualitative Approaches

Diane Hogan and Robbie Gilligan, Editors

Researching Children's Experiences: Qualitative Approaches

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Proceedings of Conference, 27 May 1997
The Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin

preface

Recognition of the importance of children's own views of their experiences has begun to permeate many areas of social life. This recognition is beginning to be reflected in legislation, legal instruments, research agendas, the policies and aspirations of service providers, and the criteria of programme evaluators. The experiences of children are gaining a higher profile, whether these are the experiences of children as social beings, as citizens, as victims, as consumers, as actors in social settings and social systems, or as service recipients. Across a broad spectrum of fields, interest has grown in appropriate methods for gaining access to children's experiences directly, rather than using traditional methods which typically involve mediation through adult reports.

The Children's Research Centre recognises the need to develop and document methods for researching children's lived experiences. This conference was conceived and organised, together with our colleagues Sheila Greene and Barry Cullen, as the first in a series of steps towards raising awareness and providing a forum for developing knowledge in this area. This first step brought together a rich range of speakers and participants to start an ongoing discussion of appropriate research methods for gaining direct access to children's own emotions and perceptions.

The high levels of interest in this conference, as evidenced in the numbers and range of participants and in the number of inquiries we received from five continents, reflect the increasingly high profile of children's lived experiences. We set out to be inclusive in our programme and in the audience we sought to attract. We hoped to bring together a range of disciplines, levels of expertise, and work settings including community and voluntary agencies, statutory services, universities and research institutions. We feel that we were successful in doing so--participants reflected a wide range of academic and professional interests. The conference was attended by national and international participants representing such diverse fields as Psychology and Social Studies, Clinical Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy, Psychiatry, Sociology, Teacher Education, Geography and Social Policy, as well as social services and voluntary bodies. We were extremely pleased to have attracted interest from so many fields which touch the lives of children, as our aim was to begin to convene a cross-disciplinary network of researchers and practitioners with an interest in research with children.

We also aimed to attract the interest of a broad spectrum of research interests and involvement, from relative veterans to novices in research. This too was reflected in the profile of the participants: established researchers, practitioner-researchers, aspiring or intending researchers, and people who were contemplating embarking on or commissioning research on children's experiences. Regardless of the level of research experience some participants may have had, in some ways this emerging area brings us all back to the fundamentals, as so often encounters with children do. A wide variety of perspectives was evident in the papers and discussions. There was a sense of appreciating different contributions to understanding the issues in this emerging area, and of beginning to move beyond the rhetoric to practice listening to, and valuing, children's subjective experiences.

The keynote papers presented at the conference tackled the philosophy behind conducting--or failing to conduct--research on children's experiences, and the ethics involved in doing so. These were followed by papers which outlined the practicalities and methodological problems of conducting qualitative research with children in a variety of circumstances, including foster care, residential care, and life on the streets, and papers which discussed efforts to capture children's understanding of bullying and of the legal system.

The Children's Research Centre is committed to applying research to improve the lives of children and to understand their needs. We believe that researching children's experiences is key to developing theory, practice and policy relevant to the lives of children. The tremendous interest and goodwill shown towards this conference was very gratifying--it appeared that in planning this event we tapped into a rich vein of interest and demand. We hope to continue to contribute to this area and plan to convene further seminars on this theme. We are also developing a proposal for a book focusing on methods of researching children's experiences. Through these efforts, we aim to actively engage in a developing network of interested researchers and practitioners, and see this conference as a starting point for future collaboration on researching children's experiences.

Finally, we would like to thank Margaret Allister, Barry Cullen, and Sheila Greene for their help in organising this conference. We would also like to thank Ailbhe Alvey, Helen Buckley, Pam Issaacson, Paula Mayock and Amy Murray for their help and support.

Diane Hogan & Robbie Gilligan, Editors
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valuing the child in research: Historical & current influences on Research Methodology with children

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introduction

There is currently a growth of interest in qualitative approaches to conducting research with children, and especially in methods allowing children to directly relate their lived experiences. This is occurring not only in academic departments which are concerned with children's issues, such as developmental and clinical psychology, social studies, education, anthropology, sociology and so on, but also in practitioner domains including clinical work with children by psychologists, speech therapists, teachers, and others. Throughout this century, however, research with children has not sought to understand children's subjective experiences and their worlds, it has not sought children's own perspectives on their behaviour, on their feelings, and on their evaluation of the kinds of services they receive. The dominant approach has been to exclude children from offering their own perspectives in the research process. There are two aspects to this exclusion: one is that research has predominantly used quantitative reductive models, where children must respond to preset standardized questions. These afford little room for children to describe their own views and the meaning that their experiences hold for them in their own words. The second aspect is that most research conducted about children's experiences targets adults as informants rather than children themselves. There are numerous examples of this practice: children are rarely asked to evaluate the parenting, teaching, or care they receive although they are the primary consumers. In this paper I aim to uncover some of the reasons behind this approach to children in research.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Approaches

This conference is subtitled "Qualitative Approaches." It is important to clarify this use of the term "qualitative" at the outset. In using this term, and in contrasting it with the term "quantitative" I do not mean to imply that there is a simple dichotomy between these two approaches to research. In reality there is continuum. There are certain situations where it is necessary to use quantification--or numbers--in order to summarize data. For example, quantitative methods are used in content analysis, which is very much a qualitative approach, and are also used for coding in observational analyses and in demographics.

In the context of this conference, the term "qualitative" is used to represent an orientation to research that is quite different to what is traditionally viewed as the quantitative approach: it is an approach defined by openness and inclusiveness, it aims to capture children's lived experiences of the world and the meanings they attach to those experiences from their own perspectives. It allows them to describe those experiences without the level of restraint that is often used in quantitative approaches. Furthermore, it recognizes the potential effects of the research context and the role of the investigator and how that might come to bear on how children behave during the research process. It must also be recognised that a qualitative approach broadly encompasses a diversity of measures and of particular methods, rather than a single one (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Krahn, Hohn, & Kime, 1995).

Although there has been a recent surge in interest in this orientation to conducting research with and about children, in practice research of this kind is not a new phenomenon. Margaret Mead, for example, wrote about adolescent girls' experiences of puberty in Samoa in the 1920s, and others, such as the Whitings in cultural anthropology and some early development psychologists, used qualitative methods. Their usage waned over the last several decades, however, until their recent "rediscovery". It is important to acknowledge the small number of researchers who are currently contributing work of this kind, including a number of the speakers at this conference. Professor Malcolm Hill, for example, has conducted work on the experiences of children of alcoholics, while other speakers are involved in research on children's experiences of child care, victimisation, bullying, and the legal system. Work is also being conducted in the area of children's evaluation of day care, schooling, etc.

objectives of paper

In this paper, my principal objective is to begin to locate this emerging interest in research that elicits children's own perspectives, and the meanings they attach to their experiences, in the history of research with children. I will attempt to uncover some of the assumptions that gave guided research with children over the course of this century. My central argument is that an identifiable core of assumptions have dominated thinking about the nature of childhood and led to the adoption, either implicitly or explicitly, by most researchers on children of a model of the child as "research object". This model permeates the research process across several fields concerned with children's issues. The validity of these assumptions are now being questioned, giving rise to changing research goals and methodologies. It is not possible to trace every influence on the adoption or subsequent questioning of these assumptions and this paper will focus on those that appear to me to be most salient, given my own background in the area of developmental psychology.

In describing a "dominant" model I do not mean to suggest that other models have not been available, or indeed subscribed to. Nor do I mean to suggest that all those who subscribe to the dominant model necessarily accept all of the assumptions that I will describe, or that it is a static model that has been unchanging over time. I believe, however, that this model has shaped most contemporary research with children. A cursory glance at the leading academic journals in the interdisciplinary field of child development research immediately provides evidence of the widespread acceptance of this model.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I will provide an overview of the dominant research model. Second, I will discuss the ideas that have contributed to the construction of the model. Third, I will describe the emergent challenges to that model and finally, I will address some of the implications of questioning the model and of embracing the implications of a qualitative, child-oriented, approach.

Dominant Research Model: The Child as Research Object

The model of child as research object can be broken down in to four categories of assumptions. Associated with each of those categories are a number of sub-assumptions. The first assumption is that the child is distinctive, or qualitatively different from adults. Although there has been some debate about whether the differences are quantitative or qualitative it is generally accepted that childhood is a distinctive phase of the lifespan and is worthy of attention as such. Secondly, it is assumed that the child has an existence that is essentially context-free, or that context can be stripped away to reveal the true child or the essence of childhood. Thirdly, it is assumed that the child is predictable --that the child is essentially known to adults, and that it is possible to map out exactly how childhood will proceed. Finally, and perhaps this is the idea that is most relevant for us here today, it is assumed that the child's own views are largely irrelevant for research purposes.

Table 1. Model of the Child as Research Object

Ontology *Assumptions about children*	Epistemology *Assumptions about research with children*	Methodology *Application of research with children*
Distinctive	leads to knowledge about the nature of childhood	tests and measures tailored for use with children
Context-Free	leads to information about the "objective child"	efforts to "control" or neutralise effects of context; standardised tests; culturally-insensitive instruments
Predictable	leads to universal laws of child development	exclusion of non-typical children; variation interpreted as deviance

Irrelevant
  unformed
  passive-dependent
  unreliable
	children's reports not valued to same extent as adults'	use adult reports instead of children's own

This model can be broken down further into its ontological and epistemological components and their associated methodologies, as shown in Table 1. The ontological position is the set of assumptions about the nature of the world and of children's place within it. This might include, for example, assumptions about children's social and intellectual capacities, and their expected contribu-

tion in research. The epistemological position is the set of beliefs associated with that ontological stance, a set of assumptions about the kind of research that can be conducted, and about the kind of knowledge that researchers can obtain about children. It concerns such issues as whether the data collected constitute a reflection of objective reality or are socially constructed. It also concerns the perceived nature of the research process, such as the role of the investigator and the child. The ontological and epistemological standpoints adopted place constraints on the methodology that can be used, that is, on the instruments and on the interpretation of findings, as I will now go on to illustrate.

The Distinctive child

The first ontological assumption of the model is that children are distinctive or different from adults. This is fundamental to all of our research with children. The associated epistemological assumption is that it is possible to obtain knowledge about this unique experience of childhood that is different from adulthood. We use child-oriented tests and measures as our methodology because we believe we are looking at something quite distinctive.

The context-free child

The second assumption is that the child is context-free, existing independently of location, time, and social relationships. This echoes a core assumption of the positivist paradigm that has dominated research throughout the social sciences. Essentially, it holds that an objective reality exists that is separate from the research process. It follows that an objective child exists and that there is a universal experience of childhood. This can be seen in attempts to identify universal laws of childhood and child development that apply whether children grow up in Eastern Timor or the south inner city of Dublin. It can also be seen in failure to recognise the potential role of historical time in altering children's experiences and capabilities, and in a tendency to believe that these can also be separated from children's social relationships and from the immediate settings of their families.

The associated epistemological belief is that it is possible to reveal the "true child" by stripping away the "distorting effects" of context, that is, of location, time and relationships. Research is approached with the belief that it is possible to record a "true score", reflecting a reality that is untouched by the research process. The concept of reliability of measurement is based on this belief.

Arising out of these assumptions, methodologies are employed that aim to "control for" context. Standardised tests are used to attempt to measure children who have grown up with very different experiences in very different cultural contexts. Furthermore, artificial research settings such as laboratories are used in attempts to remove the effects of context, and the potential effects of those ostensibly neutral settings on children's responses are often ignored.

The predictable child

The concept of the predictable or the known child reflects the assumption that childhood is a well-regulated and standardised developmental process. In the dominant model children are viewed as developing according to strict age parameters--they are expected to acquire competencies in predictable time scales and sequences. Child development is viewed as proceeding in a linear fashion ahead or in advance, that is, as involving only progression and no regression. Those who adhere to this model are uncomfortable with the idea of childhood as chaotic, fragmented, non-linear or indeed idiosyncratic and a good deal of energy is invested into seeking out universal age parameters. In terms of methodology, most research is conducted with typical children possessing average abilities, rather than those with special needs. Variation beyond certain defined limits in children's experiences and capacities is usually interpreted as deviance.

This particular set of assumptions about the child allows adults to position themselves as experts about children, as knowing more than children do themselves, or at least knowing as much as them because they have already personally experienced childhood. The logic of this argument is that, if childhood is standard and universal rather than idiosyncratic and dependent on a particular context, then adults should have full knowledge about it. This helps to validate the widespread use of adult reports on children as a substitute for children's own perspectives in research. It also allows for use of adult views as the "gold standard" (Hodges, 1993) against which the reliability of children's own contributions is assessed.

The irrelevant child

The concept of the irrelevant child reflects the assumption that children have little to offer to research. This can be broken down into three sub-components: one is that children are essentially *unformed*, or are as yet in the making. Developmental psychologist John Morss (Morss, 1996) has said that we tend to represent children as "becomings" rather than "beings". We see them as being transient, in the process of going somewhere, which allows adults to command power over the present and to focus on children's passage into the future rather than their actual experiences in the present. The second component is the idea that children are *passive and dependent* on adults, that they are very vulnerable and are not active agents in their own lives. Therefore they should not be viewed as the locus of agency for their experiences or for knowledge about those experiences. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this conference, is the idea that children cannot provide reliable accounts of their own experiences--that they are *unreliable informants*. This views children as being highly prone to fantasy and to making up stories. Because we believe that there is an objective reality or single truth we are seeking the "true" story and interpret children's accounts as being unreliable or inconsistent with that true reality when compared to adults' reports. For the purposes of research, the irrelevant child is believed to have little of value to contribute to answering questions about child development.

The set of assumptions described here together form the dominant model. As a result of widespread adoption of this model, research with children has largely resulted in objectification, and the denigration of the value of children's own potential contribution to research and to a body of knowledge about how they develop and experience the world. How did this model come to be constructed and maintained?

Constructing the Dominant Model

Early philosophers

It is important to acknowledge that in the very early days of writings about child development, evident in the work of philosophers Locke and Rousseau in the 17th and 18th century, some formative and influential ideas were laid down about the nature of childhood which may have seeped into general consciousness and beliefs about the nature of childhood. Both philosophers believed that childhood was distinctive and worthy of attention. Locke called attention to the idea that early childhood is a formative and vulnerable period. This notion has contributed to a welcome focus on early childhood services and early childhood experiences in research. On the other hand, however, it may have also contributed to the idea of the child as passive and dependent and therefore to our underestimating of the value of children's contributions. Rousseau, likewise, emphasized the importance of childhood. He believed, however, that children did not reach the "age of reason" until the age of 12--meaning the age of adult reason--and that they could not be relied upon to make meaningful judgments until that age.

These ideas of childhood innocence and purity contributed to the creation of a moral imperative to improve the lives of children and agitation for children's rights (Kessen, 1979). Paradoxically, however, they may also have laid the foundation for the view of the child as passive, inexpert, and lacking valu-

able knowledge. Hendrick (1990) argues that these ideas were evident as recently as the era of the industrial revolution when parents went out of the home into the workplace and there was need for social control. At this time it was useful to position children as vulnerable and indeed as ignorant. The justification for public education at that time was that children, especially working-class children, were in need of socialization and education. There was denial of children's street knowledge and a portrayal of children as ignorant. Although the terms used to discuss these ideas have changed, the same basic attitudes to children continue to exist.

Early institutes for the study of children

In the nineteenth and twentieth century the study of children became formalised in institutes in the United States and in Europe, and also in academic departments of psychology, anthropology, and home economics. The first if its kind, the Merrill Palmer Institute, had seen how objective science contributed to improvements in farming and agriculture and thought that the scientific approach could similarly contribute to the improvement of childrearing methods. At this time of attraction to the potential of science to bring progress through objective methods, there was a proliferation of progressivist ideas. Indeed it is an inherent assumption of science that it offers progress. These ideas and attitudes helped to bolster acceptance of a model of the nature of the child as objective, context-free and predictable and certainly to a goal of identifying universal laws of child development.

The influence of positivism

The most influential scientific paradigm throughout this century, as mentioned earlier, has been positivism. It has been argued that social sciences adopted this orientation, ironically, at a time when the natural sciences were starting to question whether it was useful as a single approach to research. It was wholeheartedly adopted and with it the assumption that there is a true reality that researchers can describe, mostly using quantitative methods. Because of the rise in technology and the sophistication of quantitative methods they came to be equated with scientific rigor. At the same time folk knowledge about children and children's own contributions became denigrated. All narrative, discursive accounts became devalued, particularly in the study of children.

Challenges to the dominant model

Given the influence and dominance of this model, what caused it to be challenged, and where did the questioning arise from? There has not, in my view, been a linear progression of enlightenment about what children can offer to research. Nor is there a single source of questioning and alternative ideas. As mentioned earlier, criticisms of the dominant model of research on children have existed for a long time. They have come, furthermore, from a variety of sources, some of which I will now describe.

Challenges from the theory domain

James Mark Baldwin in sociology, John Dewey in education and Lev Vygotsky in psychology were among a number of theorists interested in human development who promoted the importance of investigating the meaning and relevance of children's own experiences from the outset of the century. These ideas were also central to the Gestalt framework in mid-century psychology. The contributions of two developmental theorists were particularly important in helping to dislodging the dominance of this model in developmental psychology, those of Lev Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner. Both theorists argue that context is not merely important but integral to children's lives and cannot, therefore, be separated from them. Attempts to de-contextualise the child are therefore counterproductive to understanding how children develop. Bronfenbrenner (1979), in particular, emphasised the concept of *ecological validity* in research, which is the idea that research should have relevance to the every day lives of children and the personal meanings that events have for them.

challenges from the empirical research Domain

Another source of challenge to the assumptions of the dominant model arise, somewhat paradoxically, from research on children's memory, an area of research which has been embedded within the traditional (and dominant) model. In particular, it arises from research on children's testimony which has led to new insights into the limitations of children's intellectual competencies and the role of contextual factors in creating those limitations. In the dominant model, as I have argued earlier, researchers have accepted clear parameters around the abilities of children at specific ages and on the basis of these parameters, derived from research conducted under controlled laboratory conditions, have tended to believe that children have very limited capacities to contribute reliably to the research process.

Of course, the idea that there are strict parameters around development have long been challenged by writers such as Margaret Donaldson (1978), who pointed out that when we try to make ourselves understandable to children they are more competent than we expected them to be. A growing body of research, especially on children's autobiographical memory, now provides empirical evidence that even children as young as aged two and three can give very accurate accounts of their experiences. This is especially true of children's memory for personally experienced events. Researchers such as Fivush (Fivush & Hammond, 1990) and Ceci (Ceci & Bronfenbrenner, 1991) suggests that children are indeed very suggestible and that this may give rise to inconsistencies in their stories. It also reveals, however, that children are highly suggestible to the *research context* itself. It may therefore be the case that the manner in which research has been conducted with children has itself given rise to inconsistencies in children's reports of events, and therefore helped to create the assumption that children are unable to provide reliable and credible accounts of their own experiences. For example, it has now been found that if young children are interviewed several times they are inclined to believe that their first answer was incorrect and that the investigator is looking for a different answer, rather than the same answer again. This is in contrast with a typical adult reaction to repeated questioning. A further explanation for some of the inconsistencies in children's accounts may be that developmental change has occurred in the intervals between interviews which resulted in changes in children's understanding and presentation of events. It is ironic that this possibility should be overlooked to such an extent by experts on children's issues.

Recent research on children's testimony also indicates that the use of standardised questions has contributed to the view that children's reports are typically inaccurate. When unstructured questioning and particularly free recall are used as well as, or instead of, standardised closed questions, children are afforded opportunities to clarify their thinking and to give more accurate and comprehensive reports of their experiences.

challenges from the practice Domain

Challenges to the assumptions about children contained in the dominant model also arise from recent events in the practice domain. This is partly due to growing attention given to the issue of child sex abuse and to children as witnesses. Very often children are the only witnesses in such cases. As a result, it has been necessary to pay more attention than previously to their reports of events. Williamson and Butler (1995), in the UK context, argue that there is currently greater public scrutiny of assumptions about children following the Cleveland affair and residential care abuse cases, in which cases children said that they had complained but were ignored or were not believed. As a result there is a questioning of the extent to which sufficient attention and credence are being given to children's reports and complaints. Parallels can be drawn in Ireland in residential care affairs such as the Goldenbridge and Madonna House cases and in cases of abuse of children by members of the clergy.

challenges from the policy domain

Closely linked to the practice domain, finally, is the policy domain. There have been changes in recent years at both the international and national levels that reflect a growing value for what children's own views can contribute. In particular, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child reflects a value for the subjective worlds and views of children that is virtually unprecedented in policy. Article 12 is the most relevant for research purposes, in that it contains the concept that the views of the child should be given due weight:

> State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child be given due weight, in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Similarly, in the Irish Child Care Act (1991) consideration of children's wishes has been given special attention. The act grants to the child:

> the right, subject to age and capacity, to have "due consideration" given to his or her wishes (S3.2(b))j11

The UK Children's Act (1989), similarly, focuses on the views and wishes of the child (Davie, 1996), laying down a framework for court decisions about children and containing a checklist of factors to be considered in making decisions about a child. It emphasises the *"ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child (considered in the light of his age and understanding."*

The practical implications for children of these changes at policy level are filtering through to changes in the treatment of children, leading to more child-centred practices (Davie, 1996) and an approach to children that is more respectful of the importance of their perspectives.

Changes occurring in each of the domains mentioned here contribute to a growing recognition of the need to re-introduce an emphasis on personal meaning and experience in research, on the need to look at the subjective experiences of children, rather than attempting to objectify those experiences. Out of this recognition, interest in qualitative methodology has gained strength. A model of research, which may be termed "the Child as Research Partner," is attracting increasing attention. It is important not only that the mechanics involved in applying such a model are understood, but also that the assumptions it contains, and the ethical implications of its application are explored.

conclusions: a model of the child as research partner?

To conclude, I am proposing that an alternative set of assumptions to those embodied in the majority of contemporary research on children's issues is emerging and gaining increasing attention from a researchers and practitioners in a broad spectrum of fields concerned with childhood. It is important to identify the implications of these "alternative" assumptions. While I do not have the time to examine these implications here, I wish to raise some questions which may help to guide our analysis of the emerging qualitative approach.

The main question is perhaps whether the two models, child as research object and child as research partner, juxtaposed in this paper, are in fact mutually exclusive? Is it necessary, or indeed desirable, to forfeit one entirely in order to embrace the principles of the other? It is important to be aware of the dangers of polarising positions and of discarding one model before carefully considering the extent to which we are willing to give up some or all of the assumptions it contains. Are we willing, for example, to forfeit the notion that adults know best for children? What are the implications of doing so?

Indeed does our culture allow us to treat children as equal partners, particularly in the Irish and UK contexts? Are we prepared for the kinds of interactions and relationship with children implied by this, and do we consider them to be uniformly appropriate? On a practical and ethical level is it appropriate to treat children as a partner in research and to ask them to talk to openly about their feelings, fears and needs when they are not accustomed to doing so in their every day lives? If they are not being treated as partner or as an equal in their every day life, in whatever context they live, is it appropriate and ethical for researchers to force that model of adult-child interaction upon them?

Other speakers will address implications such as these, both directly and indirectly, in their individual papers. I hope that by uncovering some of the assumptions that have guided our research with children, and the forces that have operated to construct and challenge them, we can engage in future discussions of such practical issues with greater clarity.

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ethical issues in qualitative methodology with children

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with ethical issues in carrying out qualitative research which directly involves children. This has received surprisingly little attention until recently. I believe that all kinds of research, quantitative and qualitative, make contributions to our understandings of children, but I do wish to give particular emphasis to qualitative approaches in the broad sense identified by Diane Hogan in the previous paper. It is essential in my view to have more research which is open to children's own views so that they can express what are relevant matters and priorities for them. This contrasts with most previous research in which adult researchers have investigated their preconceived ideas about what is important. Often this has been done in the cause of testing abstract hypotheses and concepts which do little justice to the lived experiences of children.

I shall suggest that children are just as entitled as adults to have very careful consideration given to their ethical needs. In many cases, the issues for adults and children are very similar, though the special vulnerability and, in some cases, their more limited understanding also require special acknowledgment. There are many questions we can raise to which there is not always an easy answer, so this paper will explore dilemmas as much as neat solutions.

children and Adults: similarities and Differences

Consideration of what is special about qualitative research with children leads us to reflect on research with adults--what is similar and what is different about that? Often the tendency has been to think that special techniques and methods are needed for children. Yet often the techniques used with adults may be just as applicable, whilst some of the so-called child-centred techniques could illuminate research with adults.

It has become a truism of developmental psychology that children are less competent than adults in reasoning and verbal communication, so we need to use particular methods to take account of this. Younger children especially are less able to deal with abstract ideas, but may be able to express themselves with the assistance of 'concrete' aids, such as play materials, stories, drawings and pictures. Hence 'child-centred' approaches may be needed to inform children, gain consent and ensure appropriate participation as well as to gather data most effectively.

An equally significant difference between adults and children is that of power (Garbarino & Stott, 1992). Adults are physically more powerful than children. Socially, adults wield power and control over children in their roles as parents, teachers and in other capacities. Usually children have expec-

tations of obedience towards adults and see them as having expert knowledge, which means they are inclined to say what they think adults wish to hear. The social desirability effect present in research with adults is likely to be much stronger with children. They may also find it harder to say no to invitations to participate in research. The combination of perceived lack of competence and lack of power means that children are often seen as vulnerable to persuasion, adverse influence and indeed harm within research, so particular care is needed to ensure they are not exploited or adversely influenced.

On the other hand, these differences can be exaggerated. The emerging Sociology of Childhood has questioned perceptions of children as being incompetent or vulnerable (Mayall, 1994). It is emphasised that children can be highly competent if only we could find the right ways of communicating with them. Evidence about children's memory, for example, seems to suggest that in some circumstances at very young ages children can recall details of events as accurately as an adult. Many people will be familiar with just how rapidly children can learn a foreign language compared to the struggle any adult has trying to learn a second language. Researchers and others tend to use things like drawing and playing with children, because it is assumed that they are not skillful at verbal communication. Yet many adults are not very good at drawing or playing. Moreover children can be very articulate and sometimes express things vividly that adults might struggle to. For instance in one study we were thinking how to find a concise and helpful way to summarise our conclusions. We realised that one group of children we had spoken to conveyed this in a few very simple words. When asked to sum up what they wanted from parents, teachers and others adults, they said - STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN. In other words, stop and give time to children, look at children to give them attention, and listen much more completely to what children were saying (Hill, Laybourn, & Borland, 1996).

Many of the other things that we think are important in research apply equally to adults and children. They have the same rights to understand what the research is about, and to consent or refuse to take part. Both require motivation to participate and contribute fully. Indeed it could be that adults would be more highly motivated if offered some of the more 'fun' activities used in research with children, instead of or alongside pretty dull questionnaires or interviews. There is the same need to establish rapport and to empathise with children. With adults as with children there are significant differences that are not to do with age, but concern education, class, gender, ethnic background and so on.

With both adults and children, the central aim of qualitative research should be to gain full and rich information, by encouraging them to express their point of view in the way they want, in the context they want. To see things through children's eyes requires adults to change or enhance their communication and empathic skills, to be more competent. The quote below illustrates how, if we are going to have a truly open orientation to children, we need to understand the world from their point of view.

> *Is there any one who can recover the experience of childhood, not merely with the memory of what he did and what happened to him, what he liked and disliked .... but with an intimate penetration, a revived consciousness of what he felt like then - when it was so long from one Midsummer to another. George Eliot (1903, p. 72)*

At the same time we are reminded here of an interesting contrast between children's and adults' sense of time. Children feel that their experiences of the pleasure of warm summers or rainy summers, or whatever it may be, last apparently forever whereas adults are much more conscious of the clock ticking and the calendar leaves passing by quite quickly.

So although the focus is on qualitative research with children, much of what will be said is equally applicable to research with adults. Yet the specific connotations may be quite different. When discussing research participation, stating how long an interview will take or how soon a follow-up interview will occur may have the same factual content, yet have been grasped very differently by a young child compared with most adults.

Types of ethical issue in research with children

Most researchers receive little or no guidance about ethical issues in general, let alone in relation to children. Also little written guidance is available about research with children. Most of us are still at the stage of teasing out the issues, so this analysis will pose as many questions as answers.

What consideration has been given to ethics tends to concentrate on matters of consent and potential harm in the early stages of research. Especially when it is necessary to obtain approval from ethical or medical research committees, it can seem like a stage of the research to be gone through. Yet Morrow and Richards (1996) emphasise that ethical issues apply throughout the research process. They rightly stress that ethical considerations may arise beyond the consent and engagement phases through the data gathering and analysis right on to the way in which findings may influence policy and practice positively or negatively in terms of the impacts on children's lives. Thinking beyond the end of the research is often neglected, especially when researchers themselves are on short-term contracts and have to move on to other projects. Findings can be mis-used or distorted by the media, especially when dealing with complex but high profile issues like crime, abuse or addictions.

A very helpful guide to the different elements and stages has been provided by Alderson (1995), based on extensive consultations with researchers and young people. Table 1 shows the ten core ethical issues in research with children which she identified, plus a sample of the 80 questions she drew up.

I shall focus on four clusters of issues to address:

- **the issue of children's involvement in research,**

- **questions about consent and choice,**

- **consideration of possible harm or distress,**

- **matters of privacy and confidentiality.**

1. Children's involvement in research

There is not a lot to say about this, because children are very rarely involved as active participants in research, in contrast to their role as 'objects of study' (Hill et al., 1996). There are very few studies with adult 'subjects' I am aware of which incorporate them in the design, analysis or reporting. Examples with children are even fewer and they usually concern children on the threshold of adulthood--16 and 17 year olds. One study was promoted by Barnardos where older teenagers were involved through the whole process of finding out the needs of young disabled people (Alderson, 1995). That is a rare example of research which involved children from beginning to end. Another example occurred when children were asked to help interpret data, in this instance maps and drawings produced by street children (Ennew & Morrow, 1994). In Canada a researcher worked with young people using computers and sat alongside them looking at issues which were important to them in defining their experiences of residential care (Martin, unpublished).

However there are more examples of where researchers have given children greater scope for input and choices within a pre-established framework of research purpose and design. By this, I mean that children are asked to set the agenda or provided with options in group discussions or personal interviews. Here children are told that the intention is to explore an issue and cover certain themes, but they are encouraged to tell their own story, decide which aspects to concentrate on and in what kind of way. This has been true for studies I have been involved in with regard to children's well-being and parenting, for example (Hill, Laybourn, & Borland, 1995; Borland, Hill, & Brown, 1996).

Table 1. Key Ethical Issues in Research with Children

	Topic	Sample Questions
1	Research Purpose	Is the research in children's interests?
2	Costs and Benefits	What are the costs and risks for children of doing or not doing the research?
3	Privacy and Confidentiality	What choices do children have about being contacted, agreement to take part, withdrawing, confidentiality?
4	Inclusion and Exclusion	Who is included, who is excluded? Why? What efforts are made to include disadvantaged groups (e.g. those with physical impairments, homeless young people)?
5	Funding	Are funds "tainted"? Are resources sufficient? In what circumstances should children be recompensed?
6	Involvement and Accountability	To what extent can children or carers contribute to the research aim and design? What safeguards and checks are in place?
7	Information	Are the aims and implications clearly explained? Is written documentation available in other languages
8	Consent	How well are rights to refuse co-operation explained and respected? Are informal "pressures" used? What is the correct balance of parental and child consent?
9	Dissemination	Do participants know about and comment on the findings? How wide is the audience for the research - academics, practitioners, policy makers, the public, research participants etc.?
10	Impact on Children	How does the research affect children through its impact on thinking, policy and practice? Are children's own perspectives accurately conveyed?

Another related issue concerns who is included in the research (Alderson, 1995). As Diane Hogan said, so much research is about the typically average universal child. What about the many children who are not included, such as children from minority ethnic backgrounds or children with sensory or visual impairments. Perhaps because it may be more difficult to communicate with them, the views and experiences of these children can be excluded. Homeless children are often more difficult to involve as well because they are hard to locate.

2.   consent

It is generally accepted in principle that children, as adults, should be entitled to give informed consent before they take part in research. Yet approaches vary greatly in practice. In some kinds of observational research with young children, they may at best be informed rather than asked about the research. Infants are clearly not in a position to give agreement.

It is argued here that children of sufficient age and understanding have the right to be told fully about the nature and implications of research they take part in, and to be able to say yes or no if they want to be involved in the research. This raises the questions about what age children are truly able to give informed consent. I use the word "truly" in inverted comas, because how we judge that is often from an adult perspective. One study about children's abilities to make decisions on medical research showed that fourteen year olds were just as competent as adults in making decisions about that. Indeed in most respects nine year olds thought about the same considerations as adults did with one or two differences. So we can be reasonably confident that by about eight or nine most children are able to decide about being researched or not. However it would be unduly restrictive not to ask children below that age, as even 3-4 year olds can have some understanding of what an observation, interview or data gathering game may entail. In any case, social research does not have the same implications about possible benefits and harm as medical research. Equally we should not be too bound by age and stage assumptions, but negotiate on an individual basis. Some younger children will be able to understand and decide about involvement; some older ones and adults will not.

Ideally, consent should be obtained in person so there is an opportunity to discuss what the research is about and its implications. Tight research timescales often do not allow time to do that, so then it is necessary to rely on giving out forms of written consent in advance or asking significant adults like parents to obtain agreement beforehand. When that happens, it is very important that when the researcher does first meet children who have agreed to take part, time is taken to check out with the child or group, that they do understand what the research involves and that they are really willing to take part. This approach is second best, because once the researcher has arrived with an expectation of going ahead with the interview or questionnaire or whatever, the social and power dynamics make it very difficult to say no. Children should also know that even after giving consent in general, they may withdraw later or decline a particular element. For instance they should not feel obliged to answer particular questions they do not wish to.

There can also be tension between the desire to give children a genuine choice about whether to take part and the wish to get the biggest response possible. Emphasising that children (or adults) should only agree if they really want to may mean that more say 'No', which evidently goes against the desire to obtain a large and/or representative sample. Fortunately in qualitative research this may be a less significant consideration than in quantitative research, though it is still important that samples should not be unduly biased. There are very well known techniques used with both adults and children to enhance' co-operation', such as giving reminders, trying to be persuasive and enlisting the support or endorsement of significant others.

Expending greater efforts to explain the purpose of a study gives opportunities to motivate the child (e.g. by pointing to potential benefits to other children or possible improvements from services which may arise). But how far should you go with that? There can be a fine line between enabling children to understand more fully and therefore decide and pressurising, subtly or otherwise, within an aura of expected compliance to adult power.

I think it is also important that explanations about the research should be clear and accessible. The example shown in Figure 1, originally in colour, provides an attractive means of informing and engaging children. It explains with simple language and layout about the context of the research, where it has come from, and how it will be used. This contrasts with more usual information which consists of continuous boring text without any description about what the aims are. Forms such as these can be developed further, though the dilemma remains: in being more persuasive are we gently coercing participation?

One of the features that differentiates children from adults is that in order to get to children you usually need to go through adults in order to make the first contact (e.g. parents at home, teachers at school or social work staff for children in care). By and large we expect that younger children will need guidance and in fact need permission from adults before we can approach them. That again raises a number of ethical dilemmas, I don't know what the legal position is in Ireland, but certainly in Scotland and I think in England and Wales, it seems to be uncertain the extent that you do need to get parental consent in relation to research. The guidance I have seen about this usually draws parallels with decisions about consent to medical treatment, but that is different from research. The British Psychological Society recommends that parental consent should be gained for the involvement of any child under the age of sixteen. That is just a recommendation, but researchers do generally assume that prior permission should be sought from parents.

We have encountered instances when children were quite willing to take part, but the parents refused, as well as vice versa. What is the role of parents in these circumstances? Arguably parents have a protective right to act on behalf of their children, but it is not always clear that the considerations which lead them to refuse are connected with what's best for the child. Ought they to represent the child's views (if old enough), reach a joint decision or exercise choice on behalf of children? If they decide without consulting the child or override a child's wishes, should they do this based solely on their view of the child's interests or consider wider family interests. Whatever might seem desirable, it is likely that in practice parents (and other adult gatekeepers) will decide on behalf of children for all sorts of reasons, including their own defensiveness or convenience. Then does the researcher have the right (or the influence) to encourage parents more responsibility to children? Schools and other agencies sometimes make blanket choices which they say is to protect children from unnecessary intrusion (e.g. with respect to research on child abuse), but do not necessarily consult with the children concerned, some of whom may wish to participate. Conversely when teachers agree that a school class may fill out a questionnaire it may be hard for individual children to desist.

If a parent or other adult refuses for a child to participate in research, without the child knowing or being asked an opinion this seems to be contrary to current notions about children's rights, i.e. that they are entitled to have their views taken account of. This principle is embodied in Section 6 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, for instance.

A further issue related to consent which evoked an interesting debate at our Centre concerns whether it is appropriate to give children any kind of gift or payment for participating in research. Leaving aside the matter of whether research budgets can stretch to this, a principle upheld on one side of the argument is that this would an inducement and so is wrong. Others believe that it is good to express

gratitude with a small gift, which may consist of leaving coloured pens for younger children or providing a gift token to adolescents. One compromise is not to mention in advance that you are going to give the children anything, so it does not appear as an incentive. However once this has been done word is likely to get around anyway.

Issues about choice extend beyond the matter of consent to participate. We know that children in other contexts quite often have definite preferences about talking with a male or a female, an older or younger person, or someone from the same ethnic background. Research teams usually do not have the resources necessary to offer a diversity of researchers, so there may not be much choice, but we should at least consider and discuss this matter with children. For example, white men in one study spoke about this with female and black children, and asked them if they wanted to proceed (Williamson & Butler, 1995). In fact the children did carry on and stated that researchers' preparedness to understand was more important than their characteristics.

There may be scope for giving children choice about the location of interviews or group discussion. Some prefer to be seen at home on familiar territory, but others may wish to be on more neutral ground like a burger bar or a special interviewing room. For some children their home is where they are relaxed, but for others this may be experienced as intrusive or with a high risk of being overheard. A clinic may be experienced positively as private and confidential, or negatively as strange and intimidating. Since qualitative research does not require standardisation but fullness of data, decisions about this can be individualised and negotiated.

Another set of problems involve children who say too much or too little. An array of techniques is available to encourage children to communicate more fully (see e.g. Hill, 1997). Arguably these may encourage children to say things they may later regret or not wish to be disseminated. Recently we had a rare opportunity to check with children about how some of their drawings and quotations were to be used in a booklet for parents. One child recognised something she had said and asked for it to be taken out, which it was. There many occasions when we do not know that a child has revealed more than they wished. An opposite problem which I suspect all researchers have encountered is the child or perhaps particularly the teenager who says little or nothing. We may use all our communication skills to overcome inhibitions and draw out something useful. Yet silence or non-committal responses may sometimes reflect a basic unwillingness to co-operate, which should perhaps be acknowledged and accepted, rather than seen as resistance to be overcome.

3. possible harm

The next set of ethical issues are to do with possible harm from children. Only rarely do social scientists carry out research that might do physical damage, unlike medical or other research which involves physical interventions. I have sometimes wondered, though, what would happen if a child fell down the stairs on the way to an interview or tripped over a cassette recorder wire when leaving a group discussion to go to the toilet. Who is responsible for that? Fortunately it hasn't happened to me yet.

Sadly I think one consideration which we are now more aware of, is that adults might use research with abusive intentions, just as they may take on professional roles with the intention to abuse children. Geographers have conducted some interesting research about the use of children's space and territorial range which has entailed going with children to their 'secret' haunts (Hart, 1979; Moore, 1986). Now I am pretty sure this was done in good faith with a genuine interest in understanding children's own worlds. In the current climate of concern about sexual abuse, it is less acceptable for strange men to ask children to take them to their favourite hiding and play spaces in the bushes and the woods. Another example involved an American seeking to study break dancing (cited in Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). In order to facilitate rapport with some young lads, he invited them back to his house to show them a video about break dancing. Even though his intentions were apparently quite innocent, the

next day the police came around to say the parents of the boys had complained, because they thought *"why is this strange man inviting these children back to his house to show them videos?"* The Opie's carried out their fascinating insights into children's games, rhymes, jokes and songs by hanging around play-grounds in ways which might raise eyebrows today (Opie & Opie, 1959; Opie, 1993).

It would be a shame if adults could not gain glimpses into children's social worlds in such ways. On the other hand care needs to be taken about adults getting into a position with children were they might exploited them. As a minimal precaution, at our Centre we ask all our staff to sign a declara-tion, saying they have no previous convictions against children. Unfortunately we found it impossible to get co-operation from the police in terms of carrying out checks, but the University is working on that one. Although children are unlikely in most circumstances to be physically harmed in social research, the risks of emotional damage are greater. In the past, children have been deliberately sub-jected to distress in order to increase adult scientific knowledge. The well known strange situation which has played such an important part in the development of attachment theory has meant deliber-ately exposing children to upset from separation, even if briefly (Roberts & Wellard, 1997).

More commonly children may be worried, hurt or angry by questions they are asked. This is a special problem when research is exploring feelings or dealing with children who have experienced traumas. Of course, if children have had recent and deeply distressing experiences, it may be inappropriate to involve them in research at all, though whenever possible children themselves should be given the choice. Some may wish to share their experiences for the sake of others, as in the case of survivors of intra-familial abuse (e.g. Roberts & Taylor, 1993). There can still be a danger that children will want and expect therapeutic benefits for which taking part in research is not the answer. In some cases it may be helpful that if the children have someone with them, like another child or another adult, who can be there to comfort them. This could well affect the data which is produced, which would need to be acknowledged.

What is the researcher's role if children do become upset during an interview or discussion? Immediate comfort and reassurance should be given sensitively, but it is wrong to offer or imply a helping or counselling role which conflicts with the researcher's role, availability and possibly skills. It is unfair to give children false expectations and is preferable to identify with the child who may be the most suitable other person or people for them to obtain help from. This will usually be someone the child knows and trusts already. Especially in research on sensitive matters, it can be valuable to have available access to a specialist service to whom the child could be referred. In some of our con-tacts we have left cards with a help line number.

Special issues are raised if in a research contact a child discloses incidents of current abuse. The researcher has an obligation to seek to protect the child from further harm by reporting what has been said, yet the child may not want action take (perhaps out of fear). Here issues of harm and consent touch on our next issue--that of confidentiality.

4. confidentiality

We know from other studies about children that many are extremely conscious about what happens to private information about themselves and dislike the idea of peers or adults having free access to per-sonal matters (Thoburn, Lewis, & Shemmings, 1995; Trseliotis, Borland, Hill, & Lambert, 1995; Westcott & Davies 1995).

There are two types of confidentiality, with respect to the public at large and children's own social net-works. The first concerns research dissemination. In making findings public through reports, articles, conferences and so on, it is routine that individuals are not named and that they are not identifiable through case descriptions or quotations. Correspondingly, children like adult respondents, should be

apprised before giving consent about the nature of such 'public confidentiality.' As it happens, some children want to be identified and, in a sense, gain recognition for their contribution (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988). They have taken part and given their time, so why should they not get the credit? If all of the children in a particular study do want to be named then that is something that should be given serious consideration. Even then, it would be necessary to think about and discuss ramifications that the children might not foresee. A young child might be pleased to be identified for something which their older self may later feel ashamed or embarrassed about. Also other interested parties (including siblings and parents) may take a different view. There are difficulties if some of the children want to have their name mentioned and others don't.

A second type of confidentiality is what I call network confidentiality, i.e. keeping the information about children secret from relatives, friends and other people they know. Not uncommonly, the same study gains data from carers, professionals or others in addition to children. Then it is customary to assure all parties that what they say will not be passed on to the others, so that hopefully each will be prepared to talk openly (e.g. Laybourn et al., 1996). However researchers will not know and cannot control what happens after they have left. It has been my experience and doubtless that of others that some parents, teachers or carers come up after I have seen a child and say something like *"what did he say, I would really like to know?"* or *"is she OK?"*. This happens even when the need for confidentiality has been explained. They usually indicate that their interest is altruistic, i.e. to respond to any worry or criticism expressed by the child. The researcher has to repeat the rule of confidentiality, which is easier to convey if the other party has been interviewed too and so sees the need for this to apply both ways. There is still a possibility that an adult may put pressure on the children to reveal things that have been said after the researcher has departed .

A different issue arises with focus group discussions with children. The researcher can ensure that no public revelations will be made afterwards, but can group members be relied on to keep mum, too? This issue should be raised with the children at the outset in order to reach agreement with the group about confidentiality. It can be difficult for anyone including children to say nothing in the face of an inquiry from a curious friend or relative. Therefore, I usually suggest that it is all right to say something very general about the topics discussed but not to give details and not to identify what any individual said. This may be a difficult distinction for children to hold. In any case the researcher has no capacity to monitor or impose sanctions. So much depends on trust and hence on relationships in and outside the group. Unless the trust is good, Child A may keep quiet about something rather than run the risk that Child B in the group will later tell Child C outside the group.

Promises of confidentiality cannot be absolute, which brings us back to the issue of child abuse. Although it is rare, researchers may discover situations where a child is being seriously abused or is harming others. The National Children's Bureau in London has very firm guide lines, that if a researcher finds out any sort of information about child abuse that must be reported to a relevant professional. This sounds clear cut, but requires the researcher to decide whether abuse is happening or not. This involves judgment and discretion, since definitions of abuse are notoriously difficult apart from extreme cases. This prescription also takes away any rights of the child to have a say in what happens. I think most researchers hold to the view that in talking about confidentiality to children, and indeed to parents, teachers and so on, it has to be made clear at the beginning that the confidentiality might be breached if the child appeared to be in serious harm. Any action would be talked over with the child and as far as possible the researcher would try to do what the child wanted.

conclusions

This paper set out to explore some of the main ethical issues facing researchers in seeking to carry out qualitative research which engages as fully as possible with children's own experiences and perspectives. Perhaps inevitably, questions and dilemmas have been as prominent as suggested answers and solutions.

In particular circumstances, ethical matters have to be considered alongside practical, sampling and design considerations. Nevertheless, I think it is important to hold as far as possible to certain key principles, which correspond to four broad distinctions which are commonly made with respect to children's rights (e.g. Freeman 1983; Arched, 1993; Asquith & Hill, 1994) outlined in Table 2 below:

TOble 2

Types of Right	Research Ethic Principles
1 to satisfactory development and well-being	the purpose of the research should contribute to children's well-being, either directly or indirectly through increased understanding of children which can help adults who are responsible for children
2 to protection from harm	methods should be designed to avoid stress and distress; contingency arrangements should be available in case children become upset or situations of risk or harm are revealed
3 to appropriate services	children should whenever possible feel good about having contributed to research as a service which can inform society, individuals, policy and practice
4 to express opinions which are taken account of	children should make informed choices about: - agreement or refusal to take part - opting out (at any stage) - contributing ideas to research agendas and processes, both for individual research projects and to the research enterprise as a whole.

As with children's rights more generally, research with children has entered an exciting new phase. This includes new approaches towards children and childhood and interesting methodological developments. These remind us of long-standing ethical issues and challenge us with ones which are new--or at least hitherto neglected. We are at the beginning of a demanding, but fascinating process.

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Interviewing children in research: Reflections on a Longitudinal study of foster care

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Introduction

The study I am going to refer to in this paper was my doctoral thesis, the findings of which are detailed elsewhere (McAuley, 1996a, b). It was a prospective study of children in middle childhood during their first two years of planned long term foster care placements. It examined the children's perspectives on contact with birth families and significant others during the fostering process. It also explored the children's perceptions of the developing relationships with their foster carers. The emotional and social development of the children in home and school was also measured over time. It employed qualitative and quantitative measures. For the purposes of this paper, however, I am going to concentrate specifically on the research interviews with the children. Emphasis will be placed on the method and process rather than the findings per se.

With regard to the research interviews, it might be helpful to begin with the objectives pursued and then move on to the methodological and ethical issues raised. The research process and related findings will then be considered before concluding.

Research objectives regarding the children's interviews

- To ascertain the wishes and feelings of children during the early stages of the fostering process;

- To explore the children's perspective on established relationships with birth families and significant others as they progress through the fostering process;

- To examine the children's perception of the developing relationships in the foster families over time.

Methodological issues

In considering how to achieve these objectives, I found myself immediately confronted by a whole range of methodological questions. For example:

- Permission to interview the child--whose permission?

- Interview the child in familiar surroundings or in a neutral child friendly setting?

- Interview the child alone or with a trusted adult?

- Type of interview?

- **Interview the child about potentially painful areas? If so, how?**
- **Standardised instruments or developed measures?**
- **Qualitative or quantitative methodology or both?**

In this case I was hoping to interview children in the four Health and Social Services Boards covering all of Northern Ireland. Apart from gaining broad permission from the Boards, I also needed to personally negotiate access through the adults who were directly responsible for their care. Although time consuming, contact directly with the senior social workers, the social workers and foster carers was crucial to allaying any concerns/fears they may have felt.

As regards the interviews themselves, the child's perspective was central to this study and hence it was crucial that the child should have every opportunity to feel free to share his/her wishes and feelings. On the one hand it could be argued that the child may feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings such as the foster homes. However, it might well be difficult to ensure lack of interruption. Given that the children were going to be asked about their foster and birth families, it seemed preferable to choose a neutral venue. In fact the School of Psychology at Queen's offered the use of rooms which were pleasant, child oriented and without a telephone! All of the children were interviewed alone at each stage of the interviews i.e. at four months, one year and two years into placement. A trusted adult always accompanied the children and was available in an adjoining room to the interview room.

At the time of designing the study, few major research studies had or still have included individual interviews with the children as to their perceptions/feelings about their experiences. In the field of foster care the study by Jane Rowe and colleagues (1984) of long term foster care was a notable exception. In discussion with her, she confirmed that the research team had carried out face to face interviews as with adults--although care had been taken to ensure that consideration was given to the child's age and level of understanding.

Again, seeking the child's perspective on birth families from whom they were separated was likely to evoke strong feelings for them. Similarly, seeking their views regarding their new foster families with whom they were currently living was likely to produce avoidance if the questioning was too direct.

My approach to the interviews was deeply influenced by my previous practice in direct work with children in care both in social services and child psychiatry (McAuley, 1996c). Having fruitlessly searched for available standardised instruments to examine the children's perspective on the fostering process and significant contacts, I set about developing child-oriented interviews incorporating recent practice developments in direct work with children which facilitated communication. To examine the developing relationships in the foster families, however, I selected and adapted the Family Relations Test (Bene Anthony, 1957).

ethical considerations

- **Respecting the child's right to information communicated in a way s/he understands;**
- **Ensuring the child has appropriate expectations of the research and researcher;**
- **Establishing rapport/trust with the child whilst recognising research is time limited;**
- **Respecting the child's wish for confidentiality whilst ensuring effective protection;**
- **Providing choice for the child whilst recognising that s/he may have had little choice about participation;**

- **Ensuring effective dissemination whilst respecting the need for anonymity for the individual child.**

It seemed important to the children that they had received a personal letter before coming for interview. Adapting the letters so that they were appropriate across the age range proved a lot more challenging than first anticipated!

Again, personally clarifying issues such as who you are and why you want to speak to them at the beginning of each interview ensured that the individual children had no unrealistic expectations. A lot of effort went into establishing a rapport and trust with the children especially in the initial interviews. However, it had to be appropriate to a time limited research exercise with children of this age and stage of development.

Confidentiality was another crucial issue which had to be addressed not only with the Boards, social workers and foster carers but directly with each child at the outset. It seemed appropriate to assure confidentiality to the child on such sensitive matters yet it was also necessary to recognise that the situation might arise where a child would disclose that they were in a position of danger requiring adult protection. My experience of this in this research, as in previous practice, is that it is wisest to be open and honest with the child about this from the outset.

Within the interviews the children were given choices as to the use of mediums but also choices as to whether they wanted to respond to individual questions. This was necessary not only to empower the children but also given the sensitive nature of the questions.

Finally, effective dissemination for the improvement of practice was a key consideration when undertaking the study. In Northern Ireland we have a relatively small population of children in care in a small population and the children's circumstances could well be identified. Hence the core findings needed to be presented in such a way that they drew from the richness of the individual children's responses whilst ensuring the respective views of each child remained anonymous.

findings

As indicated earlier, the findings of the study are detailed elsewhere. However, it may be useful to pull out a couple of findings particularly pertinent to the theme of this conference. Perhaps one of the most important findings in itself was that the children in the study seemed pleased to have the opportunity to share their perspectives. The methods used appeared to facilitate considerable depth of response. Valuable insights into their experiences were gained. A particularly sad insight was the extent to which the children carried concerns and unresolved issues about their birth families, previous carers and significant contacts into their new placements. Direct work with the children on these matters was generally absent. Such work could have included helping them to come to terms with past experiences, ascertaining their wishes about fostering and assessing their emotional readiness to reinvest in new relationships. Consultation with children needs to be central to child care policy and practice as well as research.

conclusion

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to be consulted on matters which deeply affect their lives. The Children Act 1989 in England and Wales and, more recently, the Children (NI) Order 1995 accord a new status to the wishes and feelings of children coming before the courts. The challenge for us then as researchers is to explore how children can be involved more as active participants in research (see M. Hill, 1997) with their unique per-

spective on their experiences. With careful consideration of the ethical and methodological issues (see Alderson, 1995; Morrow & Richards, 1997) we need to ensure that research provides children with the means to ensure their voices are effectively heard.

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Researching the victimisation of street children in Addis Ababa: methodological issues

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Introduction

As a first-time visitor to Addis Ababa, one's immediate impression is of the number of children begging, working, or simply playing in the streets. All appear equally destitute. However, there are "just noticeable differences." After a period of time, one no longer categorises all children one sees on the street as "street children." Instead, one learns to differentiate between the healthy child and the sick one; between those with plastic shoes, "tyre shoes," or no shoes at all; between the well-dressed boy playing table-tennis and the destitute boy begging for his next meal. In short, one learns to distinguish between the different types of children one sees on the streets. Street children are not a homogenous population. Each child varies in terms of age, family background, economic and material security, health, education, length of time on the streets, degree of street life involvement, and overall quality of life. We must understand that the term "street children" is a generalisation encompassing a wide variety of children engaged in a wide variety of activities. It is this individualism we must grasp if we are not to fall prey to the usual stereotypes of street children. The simple term "street children" masks the heterogeneity of street children's experiences. Perhaps the reason the term "street children" is used so sweepingly and why the complexities behind the term are often not investigated is that it is, in many ways, an appealing term. By the juxtaposition of the word "street", and its implicit associations of toughness and brutality, with the word "children", and its associations with helplessness and innocence, a very strong effect is created. Broadly speaking, people either feel compassion and sympathy for street children, or where children are reported to have become "streetwise", they feel fear and mistrust of violent and ruthless thugs. The reaction depends on whether the focus is on the word "street" or the word "children." Those who write about street children are often trying to create one of these two effects and make no effort to delve any further into the realities of these children's lives. In short, the search for clarity and a realistic understanding of the street child phenomenon is often confounded by the politicisation of this issue, that is, the way in which street children are represented or packaged. Much of the street child literature has explicit advocacy objectives and tends to be well-meaning but essentially stereotypical. For example,

> "Drugs are used to relieve the burden of the horrible reality of their lives" (Daglish, 1988, p. 2).

> "All this leads us to a dream of a peaceful army of street educators who in squares, streets, and corners of Latin American cities will quietly sing, as troubadours of our time, a song of hope for the millions of children of Latin American streets, carrying to the sleeping ears of Latin American adults the children's cry: "we want to live, too"" (Morch, 1984, p. 2).

"The fear of death does not move them because their world has become cold and faceless" (Morch, 1984, p. 2).

Such writing belongs to what Agnelli calls *"the romantic school of writing, sensation-seeking or sentimental, which sees street children as strange and exotic; study of their daily lives is described in terms* of*'descending into the depths' of human experience" (1986, p. 105).* Typically this kind of writing will focus only on some of the more negative and horrendous features of street life. This is not to say that there is no truth in such statements. They may be written in the best interests of the child and are dramatised for maximum advocacy and awareness-creating effect. However, they also serve to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes by giving dramatic, usually negative, impressions of the everyday realities of street children's lives.

Apart from this type of advocacy material, the representation of street children in the mass-media also focuses on helplessness and the need for outside intervention and assistance. Ennew and Milnes (1989) refer to the media's portrayal of street children as a "pornography of misery" where the starving child is an identity-less symbol, no more than an image. Surface level images of miserable, helpless people, with no in-depth analysis of their situation, only serves to deprive the sufferers of their identity. It dehumanises them and they become no more than starving creatures deserving of our compassion, but not our respect or understanding.

Given the extensive aid-agency and media literature on street children, surprisingly little is sourced form the children and adolescents who work, and far less frequently, live, on the streets if many cities in the developing world themselves. The purpose of this paper is to describe some methodological features of gathering qualitative material on the victimisation of street children directly from the children themselves.

Methodologies

This paper describes some the methodological features of field work which was carried out with street children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, between May 1992 and December 1993 (Unicef, 1993). In total, 189 adolescents were interviewed. The primary focus was on the children's experiences of victimisation.

Street children are a difficult population to research. The language barrier, the children's suspicions and their lack of free time all combine to make the data gathering process difficult. Given the chaotic lives of the children and the hectic bustle, business, negotiating, and occasional aggression of street life, the completion of structured, paper and pen interviews posed a number of methodological problems. The nature of their lives, being essentially public, makes the gathering of any kind of sensitive information difficult. The chief methodological tool for data collection was the victim survey. The basic strategy of this technique is to interview a representative sample during a specified period of time. In addition to quantifying the abuses against street children, the work had a qualitative aspect which sought to explore the richness of children's street experiences, both positive and negative. Fattah (1993) notes the relative absence of qualitative data in the realm of victim surveys and comments that *"understanding of those experiences would be greatly enhanced were the surveys to be complemented by comparative, cross-cultural, qualitative studies of the existentialist aspects of victimisation. {Qualitative studies} inject some life into the rather lifeless numbers and percentages revealed by victim surveys" (p. 304).* Consequently, an effort was made to collect information using what can loosely be described as qualitative methodologies. It is these efforts which are discussed below.

victim surveys

In addition to collecting quantitative victimisation material, a number of issues were explored in a qualitative format. Specifically, a sub-sample of 32 adolescent girls who were living independently on the streets were asked to consider issues such as:

- **the long-term outcomes and consequences of street life**
- **factors which may make them vulnerable to victimisation**
- **the importance of friends in their lives**
- **the strategies they use for coping with victimisation**

The purpose of these questions was to investigate factors which might increase a street girl's resilience, or susceptibility, to victimisation (Lalor, 1997). The stories, anecdotes, and histories told in response to these prompts provided an account of street girls' own perceptions of their lives on the street, in their own words. For example, when asked what they felt the outcomes of having spent time on the street would be, a rich and varied range of replies was collected (multiple responses):

Table 1: predicted outcomes of living on the streets, as expressed by street girls

Predicted outcome of street life	Number
Sickness	25
Lack of education	22
Physical injury	15
Sexual diseases	9
Uncertain future	8
Homesickness	8
Other	25

Sickness was most widely mentioned as a negative consequences of street life. Twenty five of the girls felt that street life is, or would be, a threat to their physical health. Being out in the cold and wet was viewed as the main source of sickness and diseases (at an altitude of 2,500 metres, nighttime temperatures in Addis Ababa can fall to 4 degrees Celsius). The fact that spending time on the streets interferes with schooling was expressed as a concern by 22 of the 32 girls. None of the sample were receiving any education and the majority expressed the desire to avail of the opportunity. Fifteen of the girls mentioned that living and working on the streets meant that they were likely to be injured by boys.

Nine of the sample expressed a fear of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, including AIDS. Eight girls reported that by living on the streets, their futures were uncertain an their was no sense of security, stability, or future prospects in their lives. Instead, they merely lived from day to day. Homesickness was reported as a problem by eight girls. These girls reported missing their families and also missing the security that a family provides - protection from attacks, a safe place to sleep, and people who care about what happens to them. Other long term consequences of street life, expressed as "Other" in Table 1, included:

- **Nobody will care for me if I get sick (6)**

- **If I die no-one will bury me (1) I am afraid of dying (4)**

- **I may have a traffic accident (4)**

- **I'll be taken away by the police (1)**

- **I have no future, only misery and suffering (1)**

- **I have no future. I'm doomed to the streets until I die (1)**

- **I will always be ashamed because I am a beggar (1)**

These responses give us a unique insight into the fears and concerns of adolescent girls who are living and working on the streets. Clearly, the consequences of street life are seen as dangerous and negative. Not a single girl mentioned any positive aspect of being on the streets. Thus, in the girls' own words, we begin to arrive at an understanding of what living on the streets entails.

small focus groups

A further qualitative aspect of the field work involved conducting small single-sex discussion groups of three or four adolescents. These relatively unstructured discussions, which were broadly confined to issues such as victimisation, delinquency and street life, lasted between one and a half to two hours. In retrospect, this was perhaps the most informative method of gathering data and yet, at the same time, the least productive. From the positive perspective, this method was so useful because it tapped into the adolescents' natural competitiveness. Once a discussion began, the participants were generally eager to compete for attention. For the most part, each was keen to impart his or her story. This eagerness was encouraged by the fact that the groups were made up of friends and by the novelty element of speaking with a farange, or foreigner. Thus, in a short space of time a large degree of anecdotal evidence could be gathered. The transcripts of these discussion groups contain a wealth of views, opinions and perceptions about street life as expressed by street children themselves. This was particularly illuminating where disagreement or debate occurred on one or more issues. This allowed the interviewer to see the subtleties and variety of opinions and viewpoints regarding the nature of street life from the level of the adolescents themselves. Unfortunately, there were a number of disadvantages associated with this process. Given the group nature of this data gathering method, it is quite possible that a degree of "showing off" occurred. The very degree of healthy competition between friends which encouraged open communication may also have contributed to a degree of one-up-manship. A further difficulty was the public nature of this method of gathering information. This prevented enquiries into essentially private matter such as, for instance, sexual assaults and family background. Nevertheless, in spite of the limitations of small discussion groups, they proved to be a very successful way of gathering large amounts of anecdotal information in a short space of time. This material proved very useful in that it indicated possible future avenues of research.

methodological issues

facilitators

My point of contact with street children was usually through an older adolescent whom I had recruited to act as a facilitator. The ideal facilitator may be a gang leader, or some other respected member of street life in a given area. The importance of the facilitator's role in gathering data can hardly be exaggerated. He or she performed a number of important functions:

- **He or she located interviewees and brought them to be interviewed (due to the high levels of fear and mistrust among street children at that time because of the on-going "round-ups" of street children by the police, this was not always easy);**

- **He or she was trusted by interviewees so when s/he said it was all right to speak freely this served to legitimise our questions in the eyes of the interviewees;**

- **When interviews were conducted on the streets, male facilitators were important in that they served to minimise the degree of disruption from curious on-lookers and beggars.**

When interviewing street girls, it was important that the facilitator was seen not only as leader but also a friend by the interviewees. The quality of the facilitator could determine the quality of the interviewees' responses. For example, in 1992, I used the services of two facilitators-in each case they were street girls themselves in their late teens. The first facilitator worked with me for 17 interviews, the second facilitator for 15 interviews. Compare the reporting rates for the following sensitive issues, elicited while using facilitators 1 and 2, as described above:

Table 2: Reporting Rates as Influenced by Facilitators

	Facilitator 1	Facilitator 2
Rape	23.53%	53.3%
Prostitution	11.77%	46.6%

The latter girl was more diligent, hardworking and more interested in what I was doing and seemed to be closer and more caring towards the girls. If she knew a girl was concealing information, she would encourage or prompt the girl to speak freely. There was no sense of bullying, rather, a very keen will to co-operate. Thus, in one instance a girl was asked whether she was prostitute. There was a long pause as she looked away, smiled, and said nothing. She started to fidget and still said nothing. The facilitator volunteered "Yes, of course she is, how do you think she lives?", at which point the girl continued to speak for herself. This was far more effective than requests on my part for honesty.

sensitivity

Issues such as sexual assault, death of parents, prostitution and homesickness are clearly emotionally charged issues. Great attention to the sensitivities of interviewees is required when discussing such issues. This was greatly facilitated by my translator, an unusually sensitive and gently man. The interviewees responded to his gentleness by being very honest and forthcoming with information. He was

able to comfort them in the event of their becoming upset and, in addition, the interviewees' friends were close by if necessary. I found there were a number of advantages to this:

- the girls were more relaxed with their friends present, rather than being alone with a farange and an unknown Ethiopian translator. They were very natural and did not appear to be reluctant to discuss anything in front of their friends.

- in the event of becoming upset, the girls had help close at hand. This was particularly useful if a girl became tearful. Physical contact is important to Ethiopians and the touch of friends was very important to an upset girl.

- I always interviewed the girl who appeared the most confident first. As she spoke freely and openly (usually), her friends could observe that there was no harm in doing so. This created an atmosphere of openness. Girls who withheld information were chided by their friends.

Sensitivity of a different sort was required when interviewing adolescent boys. They are impressed if you know the details of, say, famous robberies in the area or the slang words for neighbourhood gangs.

probing

Street children are not accustomed to speaking at length to a farange about abuse and victimisation, or indeed about anything. They may omit what the interviewer considers vital information, contradict themselves, lie, conceal or stray off the point. It was important to be aware that useful information might be lost in this way. A number of strategies were employed to minimise the risk of this:

- In order to encourage the interviewee to express him or herself openly, it was more fruitful to begin with non-threatening questions. This will hopefully put the interviewee at ease.

- The same question can be asked in a number of different ways. Children may initially deny having ever been beaten and then describe and instance where they were severely beaten in response to the question, "What is the worst thing that ever happened to you?" Perhaps it is because they are guarded and reserved at first and relax this guard later, as the interview goes on. This is why it is important not to start with threatening questions and to repeat some questions, in varied form, towards the end.

- It can be productive to allow interviewees to stray off the point to see what information they will reveal. Consequently it was important to have a flexible data gathering tool. One could gather useful information simply by allowing the adolescent to talk and to simply "go with the flow." A number of the interviewees felt that they did not want to leave until they had told me about their families and their lives. Even if they were not asked questions relating to this topic, they persisted in telling their stories. In some cases there was undoubtedly the mistaken impression that I would be able to better their circumstances. However, for the most part it was the simple human enjoyment of talking about oneself and one's life to somebody who was interested in listening. A further feature which facilitated frankness among interviewees had largely to be credited to the novelty felt by them of talking with a farange, and the certain knowledge that I would not be linked to the police or government in any way. Most of these adolescents would never have had the chance to speak to foreigners apart from begging through their car windows. It was a novelty for them to see one up close, to poke my white skin and to giggle at the hair on my arms.

- Although not normally recommended, leading questions are sometimes more useful than open questions. Thus, it was better to ask a 16 year old boy, "What is the most valuable thing you ever stole?" rather than asking the naive "Do you ever steal things?" This shows that it is

already accepted that he steals and you are not giving him the opportunity of lying by saying he does not.

- Pretending to be impressed or approving can encourage disclosure. If a boy sees that you do not find his stealing morally reprehensible, he will become more confident in revealing details. For the same reason, it is important not to let shock or disapproval show during the interview as this would inevitably cause the interviewee to clam up. This is not always easy. In one instance, I was interviewing a group of three boys who described how they and four other boys brutally raped a girl until she was unconscious. When they were finished, they assaulted her in a vicious and perverted manner. I was repulsed by this description and yet continued to allow the boys to talk.

- Over time one gets to know they children's lifestyles well enough to know when they are likely to be lying. Thus, when a 16 year old boy says he has never been beaten on the street, or a 16 year old girl says that she has never been solicited to work as a prostitute, you know the chances are that they are lying. A disbelieving glance and sometimes even an incredulous laugh was enough to persuade the youngster to be more forthcoming.

ethical considerations

By way of conclusion, I want to highlight some ethical questions associated with this research. The first issue which occurs to me is that of payment. Would financial reward colour or taint interviewees' responses? How could one not give money to family-less children who lived by begging? On the other hand, to overpay would be to ensure that one would be swamped by dozens of street children, each claiming to be prostitutes, family-less or destitute. One could never be certain as they would have claimed any kind of background in order to ensure being interviewed. In the end, it was decided to pay each interviewee modestly for his or her time. This was typically four birr (about forty pence) which is as much as a girl will get from a full days begging. This was large enough a sum to make it worth the interviewees' while, but not large enough to attract speculators. Inevitably, one occasionally came across particularly horrendous stories and one felt obliged to help in some small way, be it for medical expenses or a bus fare to the rural areas.

A second important ethical issues is that of access. In Ireland today, only the foolhardy would ask children questions regarding such sensitive topics as were described above without the permission of parents. Indeed, the ethical guidelines of professional bodies such as the Psychological Society of Ireland and the British Psychological Society prohibit us from doing so. For obvious reasons, it is not possible to obtain parental consent in the case of adolescents who are living on the streets - whether they be in Addis Ababa or Aberdeen. Juvenile prostitute literature from around the world (for example, Mehret, Khodeakevich, Shanko & Belete, 1990; Weisberg, 1985) is replete with questions regarding sexuality, drug use, and criminality. Thus, researchers who work with minors that live independently of their parents or guardians would appear to occupy uncharted ethical territory. On the one hand, professional bodies advise us not to interview minors without the consent of guardians and, on the other hand, by definition, this is an extremely difficult, if not impossible ethical standard to attain when working with unaccompanied children or youths. In my case, I felt it important to have thought through the implications of this unusual situation. Ultimately, the interviewees' welfare is paramount. Because access can be bought with a few pence this does not give a carte blanche to ask whatever one likes. I again draw your attention to the comments on sensitivity above.

This brings me to the second point which I would like to mention here - that of vulnerability. Street-wise children can certainly appear tough and invincible. Indeed, one can see the protective value of appearing tough and hard. Yet, the interviewer must not lose sight of the fact that he or she is dealing

with children or youths with an undeveloped view of life, who sometimes have the most surprising of vulnerabilities. By way of conclusion, let me illustrate this point with an anecdote: one morning I was conducting a group discussion with four boys. Three of them were participatory, eager and friendly. The fourth remained aloof, surly, and at times aggressive. His few contributions to the discussion were to narrate tales of his physical prowess in street fights. To and the session, I selected the first three to return in the afternoon to take part in more detailed case studies. I thanked the fourth and paid him for his time whereupon this tough, knife-wielding street fighter broke into tears. As he saw it, the farange was rejecting him. This was a salutary lesson for me that, with children, we must always tread carefully.

conclusion

Interviewing street children in Addis Ababa is not a constant struggle. In fact, one very important feature makes interviewing there very lucrative: The children have a biased respect for white people. They are seen as learned, benevolent and successful. Particularly in recent years, Ethiopia has been inundated with white foreigners attached to the United Nations or one of the hundreds of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's). The result can often be openness, honesty, and wealth of data. Being white in Ethiopia can, with a little effort, give one immunity from suspicion and mistrust.

Interviewing these children opened my eyes, not simply to their plight and their tears, but also to their joy and their fun. Although I encountered many terrible stories on the street, there was usually a glimmer of happiness or hope for the future. It also opened my eyes to broader issues, such as human resiliency in the face of extreme hardship and the sickening inequality between the life of a street child and hi/her counterpart in Ireland.

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what do they know about the Legal system? Interviews with Irish children

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Sometimes children must speak for themselves (Garbarino & Stott, 1992). The need to understand children's strengths and limitations in their role as informants is of paramount importance, never more so than in the case of childrenís involvement in legal proceedings, both criminal and civil.

Terr (1986) describes the child who has to testify in court as "a solitary traveller wandering through a strange maze of institutions, people and customs."(p. 471). In particular, the adversarial nature of the criminal trial process means that a child witness often has "to face a complex, adult-oriented and at times incomprehensible justice system" (Dezwirek-Sas, 1992). Despite recent legislative reforms in this area there are many elements of our legal system which have made it and still continue to make it "needlessly difficult for children to be heard as witnesses, or if they are heard, believed" (Spencer & Flin, 1993).

A parallel can be drawn between the views held in relation to children's role as informants in social research and early assumptions in respect of the reliability of children as informants in legal proceedings. In social research, for example, Mayall (1994) noted that ". . . discussions about data collection with and from children tended to focus on the following perceived problems:

- **children can't tell truth from fiction;**

- **children make things up to please the interviewer;**

- **children do not have enough knowledge to comment on their experience or indeed to report it usefully." (p.11)**

In a similar vein, Spencer and Flin (1993) catalogue some of the assumed weaknesses pertaining to the competence and reliability of children's testimony:

- **Children have difficulty distinguishing fact from fantasy**

- **Children are highly suggestible**

- **Children's cognitive and communication skills are limited.**

In contrast, more recent writers on social research hold a more positive view of children as informants. Thompson (1992) points out that "children from a surprisingly early age can understand basic elements of the research process and their role within if this information is presented in an age-appro-

priate manner." Similarly, recent reviews of psychological research would seem to uphold Thompson's view in the context of child witnesses, that is to say, that children if presented with information in an age-appropriate manner, can from a "surprisingly" early age understand the basic elements of the legal process and their role within.

The present study engaged children as informants about the legal system. Giving voice to children's own views in relation to participating in legal proceedings is one means of empowering those children who become involved in the legal system, whatever the reason.

So why is children's understanding of the legal system (or lack thereof) so important?

1. One of the major documented sources of stress for child witnesses is their lack of understanding of the trial proceedings and the role they are expected to fulfil as a witness (Deswirek-Sas, Hurley, Austin & Wolfe, 1991).

2. Children's perceptions of the court process are recognised as a critical determinant of their performance in the courtroom (Cashmore & Bussey, 1989).

3. A child's performance on the witness stand has been shown to be a factor in influencing juror's perceptions of the credibility of the child (Whitcomb, 1992).

4. Children's understanding of the role of various court personnel is recognised as a factor in children's ability to instruct legal counsel and as a factor in lawyer's communication with their young clients (Peterson-Badali & Abramovitch, 1992).

If it is of such significance, then what do children know about the legal system? Empirical research conducted in the UK, Australia and the U.S. (Cashmore & Bussey, 1989; Flin, Stevenson & Davies, 1989; Warren-Leubecker, Tate, Hinton & Ozbek, 1989; Saywitz, 1989; Saywitz, Jaenicke & Comparo, 1990; Melton, Limber, Jacobs & Oberlander, 1992; Freshwater & Aldridge, 1994) has examined children's knowledge of the legal system and how the prospect of going to court made them feel. As a whole, these studies demonstrated that children's understanding of the legal framework is obtained both gradually and imperfectly. As children mature they begin to grasp certain terms and concepts, at the same time, however, they continue to misunderstand and misinterpret others. It has been consistently demonstrated that young children have serious gaps in their knowledge of the system and the role of witnesses.

Given these findings, the present study sought to answer two research questions. Firstly, what do Irish children know about the legal system? And secondly, what are children's perceptions of attending court - specifically what are their concerns?

METHODOLOGY

participant population

The data are drawn from a total sample of two-hundred and forty (N=240). One-hundred and sixty schoolchildren were interviewed. Forty schoolchildren (twenty male and twenty female) were drawn from each of four age groups:

(i)   aged 4 - 5 years,

(ii) aged 6 - 7 years,

(iii) aged 8 - 10 years and aged 11-12 years.

In addition, eighty adults were interviewed. Forty adults (twenty male and twenty female) from each of two age-groups:

(i)   aged between eighteen and thirty-five years old and

(ii)   aged thirty-five years and over.

The participant population had little, if any, prior involvement with the criminal justice system. These were interviewed for the purpose of eliciting baseline or normative information so as to have a basis for comparison in a subsequent study of child and adult witnesses.

Design

A sample of legal terms and concepts used in Irish courts was elicited at the piloting stage of this study. Furthermore, items were drawn in part from the studies of children's legal knowledge previously cited. A semi-structured interview schedule, the Legal Knowledge and Perception of Court Interview (L.K.P.C.I.),was subsequently developed. The L.K.P.C.I. was developed as a practical research instrument for use with the children. The decision to use this methodology was based on the fact that a one-off contact was the most feasible strategy and therefore every effort had to be taken to avoid gaps in the information obtained and to ensure a format through which specific aspects of the child's legal knowledge would be covered.

There were discrete stages in the interview process:

1)   **Establishing Rapport.**

2)   **Free Narrative Questioning. "Tell me all you know about [. . .]".**

3)   **Open-Ended Questioning: "Tell me all you know about [the judge]".**

4)   **Specific Questioning: What might the judge do in court?**

5)   **Closing the Interview.**

In addition, within the Interview schedule there are distinct content sub-divisions eliciting the following information:

a)   **Demographic background**

b)   **Understanding of court procedures**

c)   **Understanding of court personnel**

d)   **Understanding of common legal terms & concepts**

e)   **Perceptions of what it would be like to attend court as a witness.**

f)   **Prior level of involvement with and sources of information about the legal system.**

Consent & Rapport Building

Prior to engaging the child in an interview, an explanation of what the interview would involve was provided and permission was sought from both the parent/carer and the child. The interviewer attended each classroom a number of times before each child was interviewed. One day was spent as an assistant in the classroom so that the children could become familiar with the interviewer. This day usually included bringing the children as a group to the room where the interviews were to take place to familiarise them with the contents of the room and its location. The child was asked again prior to commencing the interview if s/he still wished to participate.

Administration

In all previous studies children were provided with little contextual information about the court situation. The present study alongside the interview schedule, utilised a court model and a vignette with pictures. For the younger children the interview also involved a sequence of questions involving the ticking of faces to describe their feelings about a situation. Thus, although the interviewer recorded verbatim the responses of each child, all the children had some practical involvement in the interview process.

The interview duration ranged from 21 minutes to 48 minutes with the mean being 35 minutes. The children seemed to enjoy the attention given to them as individuals, they wanted to tell what they knew and the variety of research tools used meant that all the children remained focused on the interview throughout. Following the interview there was a debriefing session for all children in the classroom. This debriefing session allowed the children to expand on and clarify their experiences.

RESULTS

Children's Legal Knowledge

Children showed increasing knowledge of legal terminology and of concepts associated with the court process with increasing age. It is important to note that although the adults were skewed towards the higher end of the knowledge range, there were adults who knew far less about the court process than some of the children and there were some who demonstrated notable misunderstandings.

The majority of children, including those children for the youngest age-group (aged between four and five years), possessed an accurate, if rudimentary, understanding of the role of the Gardaí and the judge. In addition, children's understanding of terms such as "promise" and "rule" was quite developed. However, the focus of this paper is on the limitations of children's legal knowledge, given the consequences that such misunderstanding may have for a child's ability to act as a competent witness. A number of misunderstandings are worthy of particular attention.

1) **The younger age groups (those under 8) believed that mainly "bad people" went to court. As a consequence of this belief, it is possible that young children may feel pressured to demonstrate that they themselves are innocent of any wrong-doing. By age 11 years the majority of subjects appreciated that any kind of person might be involved in legal proceedings, as did the adult group.**

2) **Younger children (aged under 8's) tended to mistake the legal term for a similar sounding familiar word, for example, interpreting jury as jewellery ("jury is that stuff my mom wears around her neck") or journey ("jury's when you go somewhere").**

3) **"Giving evidence" was taken to be synonymous with presenting material evidence i.e. having the gun. No young child made reference to verbal testimony being acceptable as evidence.**

4) **The term "prosecution" was seen by the majority of children and even some of the pre-teenage sample as equated or synonymous with execution or being killed or going to jail.**

Although very few children knew the meaning of the word "oath", they did understand the concepts of "promising" and of "telling the truth". Furthermore, the younger age groups believed almost unanimously that lying in court would be punished by imprisonment. This finding raises the issue of whether, in fact, young children would possibly be less likely than adults to lie in court, for fear of the consequences.

children's perceptions regarding attending court

Children's perceptions of attending court as a witness were elicited via their reaction to a hypothetical scenario relating to their eyewitnessing a car theft. A minority of children reported that they would like to go to court, particularly as they had never been there and would like to go and see what court was like. The majority of children, however, used negative emotions such as "being afraid or being scared" to describe how they would feel of they had to go to court as a witness. This is not surprising, given their understanding of what happens in court, cited previously. Children expressed the following concerns:

1. **Speaking in front of people**

2. **Cross-examination by lawyers**

3. **Making a mistake and/or not being believed**

4. **Retaliation by the accused**

5. **Unfamiliarity with /inexperience of the trial process.**

Adults also expressed negative emotions at the possibility of being a witness but generally in terms of feeling "nervous" rather than fearful. They also referred to the unfamiliarity of the surroundings and "lack of knowledge of the proceedings" as causes for nervousness.

DISCUSSION

Overall the results, in terms of Irish children's legal understanding, support the findings of studies of children from other countries, in that most Irish children under ten years of age do not have sufficient knowledge to enable them to participate as effectively as they might as witnesses. On the basis of the information provided by the children themselves in this study, I put forward a number of recommendations which I believe, would have the effect of maximising children's participation within the legal system.

Recommendations

- **Individual assessment of a child witness's legal knowledge and feelings in relation to attending court.**

- **Preparation of children for testifying in court, tailor-made to the needs of each child witness.**

- **Provision of formal training for members of the judiciary, relevant legal, law enforcement and child protection personnel on the aspects of children's development of forensic relevance.**

- **Introduction of legal rules pertaining to lawyers' use of developmentally inappropriate language.**

- **Development of more effective, age-appropriate, interview strategies. Research has shown that in order to elicit reliable information, questions must be appropriate for the developmental level of the child being interviewed.**

In conclusion, we must endeavour to facilitate children's active participation in issues affecting their lives, to address children's expressed beliefs and concerns and to inform policy makers and other practitioners of these. Ultimately, we must ensure that children's voices are "heard" both in social research and in our courts of law.

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student perceptions & Definitions of Bullying: A question of Methodology

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As research into bullying has grown over the past 20 years, so it also reflects changing trends in the methodology used and the approach taken. This whole area has been the focus of changing methodologies in the past ten years, with researchers moving away from more quantitative methods, to more qualitatively examine bullying.

Bullying is quite an appropriate area to consider in relation to qualitative methods, as it is a phenomenon that involves no adult participation in the actual event. It is done by children to children. Therefore it is particularly important to identify the most appropriate methods to fully examine children's experiences of bullying.

In the past, the most common method used was the confidential questionnaire. This was completed by students and consisted of questions about the nature and extent of bullying as they have experienced it. These questionnaires would, more often than not, use multiple choice answers, thus limiting the student's responses. Other popular methods include teacher and parent reports of the extent of bullying in a given school. Also, when identifying bullies, researchers have used peer and teacher nominations. Smith (1991) suggests that direct observation may be the best method, but continues that considering the fact that bullying is, in essence, a secret activity, observational studies would be difficult.

Apart from considering the methodological influence of how we ask subjects about bullying, we must also consider whom we ask. The majority of research that has been completed to date has looked to students to evaluate the problem, occasionally using peer and teacher nominations to support the results. Even fewer have also surveyed parents. Furthermore, those studies that have used multiple populations often use different methods for each group, for example self-report questionnaires for students and student nominations among teachers. While this would appear to suggest a wide-ranging picture of the nature and extent of bullying, there is one problem; the majority of studies use a definition of bullying that has been designed by researchers. Therefore even when studies are asking different groups about bullying, they may be limiting the results by imposing a definition on them.

However, as we have said, researchers have begun to use qualitative methods. One of the possible starting points for this change has been an attempt to understand how younger children perceive and understand bullying. It is clear that multiple choice questionnaires would not be suitable for younger children. Work by both Madsen and Smith (1993) and Smith and Levan (1995) has used interviews to examine how children as young as six years old experience and report bullying. Also, an increasing

number of studies have looked at students' own perceptions of bullying (e.g. Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992). In addition, work by Madsen (1997) has used open-ended interviews to look at how children and adult definitions of bullying differ.

The present study used a semi-structured interview to examine how students define and perceive bullying, in an attempt to develop a student based definition of the behaviour. The reason for this is that the majority of studies in this area use a definition of bullying that has been designed by researchers. It has been found (Madsen, 1997) that adults and children's definitions of bullying differ in several areas. Therefore even when studies are asking students about bullying, they may be limiting the results by imposing a definition on them.

Method

Participants

5 schools took part in the study, two situated in urban areas, and three in rural areas. In total 167 students in fifth and sixth class were interviewed, 93 from rural schools and 74 from urban schools. There were 90 male and 77 female participants. The age range was 10 - 13 years, with a mean age of 11.4years.

Materials

A semi-structured interview was designed. It consisted of questions relating to behaviours that the students would describe as bullying, how often these need to occur to be defined as bullying, whether the behaviour must be intended to hurt or not, the reasons why some students bully others, and the involvement of friends in bullying. However, the students were initially asked about general behaviours "..that can hurt or upset kids in school.." If the student did not mention bullying during these questions (which were similar to those relating to bullying, but were asked in relation to hurtful and upsetting behaviour), the interviewer asked them if the behaviours they had described as upsetting and hurtful already could be described as bullying, and the interview continued from there.

Procedure

The interviews were carried out over two days in each school, and took place in a room in the school. Parental consent was sought and obtained for all students involved in the interviews. Before the interviews took place, the way in which the interviews would be carried out was explained to the classes involved. Students had not been informed that they would be asked about bullying, they were told that they would be asked about ".. what they thought about school, things that can happen in school, and how they get on with other students...". The interviews were taped, and once the interview had ended the students were asked not to discuss what they had said with others in the class, until all the interviews had been completed.

Problems that were highlighted

We intended to carry out individual interviews, with only the child being interviewed present. However, during the pilot study teachers expressed a concern about this and it was decided to have another child in the room while the interview took place. Such children had received parental permission to take part in the study, and were given some work to do and listened to music through headphones, to maintain confidentiality. Also, with the wide range of abilities that was found in the age group it was necessary to vary the way in which the interview took place. Often sections were not pressed if the child appeared to be having difficulty with that section in particular.

Finally, with the growing 'popularity' of bullying as a topic in the media, and it's inclusion as a section in the 'Stay-Safe Programme', more and more schools are carrying out some sort of education/inter-

vention programme. As a result some students were more aware of the area than others. Therefore it was important to ensure that we were not being given the 'typical' definition of bullying. This was the main reason why the term 'bullying' was not mentioned while the study was explained to the class. Also, in carrying out the interview, we first introduced the topic of 'hurtful and upsetting things' that happen in school. It was hoped the students would spontaneously mention bullying at this point. If this was not the case these general behaviours were fully discussed before the student was asked if the behaviours they considered to be hurtful and upsetting could be types of bullying.

Analyses

Qualitative analysis identified the behaviours that students had defined as bullying and the main themes that had appeared when examining what sort of students bully others, why some students bully others, intention and repetition in bullying, and the involvement of friends in bullying. One problem identified here was the lack of published guidelines on inter-coder and inter-rater reliability. In the end it was decided that a 10% sample would be selected at random from each of the five schools to be independently coded. 70% agreement would be taken as the figure for reliability. After analysis, inter-coder agreement was found to be just over the required figure.

Results & Discussion

As was expected, the most common behaviours described as bullying were physical (hitting, kicking, and fighting), and verbal (name-calling and teasing). Table 3 below shows the most common behaviours and the percentage of students who mentioned them.

Table 3: Most common Behaviours Described by students as Bullying

Behaviour	Freq.	Behaviour	Freq.
Name calling and/or teasing	88%	Threats, intimidation, blackmail	12%
Hitting, kicking, fighting	66%	Throwing things at students	11%
Pushing, pulling, etc.	28.3%	Exclusion/Ignoring students	10%
Taking other peoples things	13%		

Other behaviours described included spreading rumours and talking about other students 'behind their backs', blaming students on things that they didn't do, and tripping them up in the school yard or during games.

When asked about the students who bullied others, specifically whether they were stronger than other students in the class, or had more friends, the general response appeared to be that while most bullies were bigger and stronger than the victims they didn't have to be. Many students stressed the fact, particularly in relation to verbal forms of bullying, that you did not have to be stronger than some on to upset them. When asked whether bullies had more friends than other students the response varied. Some students explained that bullies tended to have less friends because of the things they did to other students.

However, while some students said that bullies had more friends, and sometimes what was described as a gang, some students explained that they were not real friends.

When asked about why students bully other students, the most common response was in order to impress, or "*..look tough in front of...*" their friends. However, another common factor was that the bully saw themselves as tougher than other students and could do it. Other reasons cited include not liking the victim, the satisfaction and fun or doing it, not having many friends and wanting more (this links back to impressing other students), and because they are always in trouble. As you can see, there are a range of reasons relating to the bully, the victim, and even the social structure within the class.

In examining the role of intention and repetition in bullying, most students said that, while behaviours had to occur more than once or twice to be described as bullying, they would take into account the feelings of the victim. Some students went on to say that a behaviour that upset a student, whether repeated or isolated, could be described as bullying. On the topic of intention, a large number of students said that a behaviour need not be intentional to hurt to be described as bullying. Also, it was found that students believe that it is possible to bully others without realising it.

One conclusion that could be drawn from responses to repetition and intention is that students place a strong emphasis on how the victim interprets a situation that could be described as bullying. Also, later in the interview students are asked if either the bully's or the victim's assessment of the situation was more important and the majority reported that how the victim views the situation is the most important.

conclusion

The results above suggest that, in many areas, students definitions do not agree with research definitions. In fact, it presents a more 'qualitative' picture, with less emphasis on the frequency with which the behaviour takes place, and more on the effects of the experience on the victims. It would suggest that perhaps qualitative methods may highlight bullying as it is actually experienced by students.

future research

The next step has been to modify the multiple choice questionnaire format taking this results into account. A questionnaire has been developed which used a definition that stressed the effect of the behaviour rather than the intention and frequency. Also, sections have been included which use students responses as the choices for answering. In an attempt to further examine the qualitative aspects a blank sheet was included, so that students could write, in their own words, or even draw, what they think about bullying. While not all the students take advantage of this, it is hoped that it will provide more insight into students' own perceptions and definitions of bullying.

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The use of focus groups in exploring children's experiences of life in care

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objectives of research

The key objective of this research was to examine the importance of the family of origin to the child in placement from the perspective of the child. In order to determine its importance, a study of the relevant literature was undertaken and the views of 10 young people in care were considered. It was hoped that this empirical study would heighten awareness of the complexity of the situation children in care face when balancing their relationships with birth and foster parents and would increase awareness of the inherent difficulties associated with contact.

key research questions

The key research questions posed in this study were:

- Are the maintenance of links between the children in care and their separated parents a desirable thing?

- Do children in care believe that they are facilitated in maintaining contact with their family of origin?

- What are the difficulties or problems inherent in maintaining contact between children in placement and their family of origin?

This small piece of empirical research is intended to elicit the research participants' understanding of why they are in placement, why they cannot be at home with their parents, how they view the present placement and their understanding of what the future holds for them. Their opinions on the role of the key players in the management of their placement, that is, their birth parents, foster carers, and social workers, are also sought. To explore these key options with the group it was decided to run a focus group.

methodology

The methodology which was used in this study was a qualitative one, consisting of two 90 minute focus group discussions involving ten young people, three boys and seven girls aged between eleven and sixteen year, from Community Care Area 8 in the Eastern Health Board in Ireland.

The main issue to be decided in methodological terms was whether to opt for a qualitative or quantitative research approach. The advantage of a quantitative approach was that it would facilitate the inclusion of a much larger number of subjects, particularly if a conventional survey research method was used. However, I decided against quantitative research methods for a number of reasons. Firstly, I was unaware of any well-validated research instrument which precisely covered the topics I was interested in. Secondly, I believed that the subject matter was so emotionally sensitive that it might seem callous to look for such highly personal information in such an impersonal manner. There was the additional concern that young people in care might simply balk at completing such questionnaires, or might provide only cursory responses. The final reason for opting for a qualitative methodology with a small number of subjects was that this was an exploratory project; to the best of my knowledge no such research has been done previously in Ireland, and the literature review included very little similar research internationally. It seemed sensible therefore, to use a methodology which reflected the exploratory nature of this project, since it also seemed likely that the subjects themselves might come up with new ideas or perspectives which I had not anticipated.

From a personal point of view, the use of qualitative methodology was close to my ordinary style of social work interviewing, which made it doubly attractive; on the other hand I was aware that this could lead to some role confusion, since these were not social work interviews, and it was necessary for me and the research subjects to constantly bear this in mind. I decided, eventually, to use the focus group approach, an approach which will be described more fully later in this section.

Initially it was intended to have one group, but as the first group progressed it was felt that mixing the two ages of early and late adolescence was inhibiting, although some valuable contributions were made. It was felt that the older ones could look in more detail at the issues raised without the distraction of the younger ones. A second group was held a week later with the older ones from the first group with two additional young people being added.

The tapes were transcribed for analysis and interpretation. During the transcription all identifying information about the children, foster carers, birth parents and social workers were removed to maintain confidentiality. The findings reported in this study are therefore of a non-identifying nature.

focus Groups

The group discussions were semi-structured. In order to explore the key questions mentioned above the following three broad topics were identified to help focus the group discussion.

- **The Past:**

  What is your understanding as to the reason why you were taken into care in the first instance? Did you know how long you would be staying in care?

- **The Present Situation:**

  How do you feel about where you are living at present?

  What are your views on the level and kind of contact you have with your birth family?

  Is this important to you?

- **The Future:**

  When you are 18 where do you think you will be living?

  What part has the social worker played in the arrangements for your care?

All questions were covered but varied in the length of time devoted to them and the depth of discussion, which was determined mainly by the group members and not the moderators. This method of research was chosen as it is thought that a detailed focus group discussion would elicit rich data, which would go some way towards answering the key questions: *"When all goes well, focusing the group discussion on a single topic, brings further material that would not come out in either the participant's own conversation or in response to the researcher's preconceived questions". (Morgan, 1988, p. 21)* A focus group may be defined as:

> *a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive non threatening environment. It is conducted with approximately seven to ten people by a skilled interviewer. The discussion is comfortable and often enjoyable for participants, as they share their ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion. (Krueger, 1994, P. 6).*

It is also suggested by Krueger that for a group to be effective it is desirable that the participants are strangers to each other. *"People open up in focus group interviews and share insights, that may not be available from individual interviews, questionnaires or other data." (Krueger, 1994, P. 30).* This give the interview results credibility. In general, as will be elaborated later, the focus group method worked satisfactorily. The participants, after some initial hesitancy settled into the discussion, appeared to trust me and ultimately to enjoy the whole process.

selection of participants for the focus Group

The ten children were selected from the current caseload of social workers in Community Care Area 8 of the Eastern Health Board. Accessibility to these children was negotiated through their parents, foster parents and social workers. There may well be inherent limitations and bias, as I am the supervisor, and one who is responsible for carrying out the statutory reviews of these children, which may need addressing. The children were over ten years old, with varying lengths of time in care, who did not necessarily know each other. The aim was to elicit the experiences, perceptions, concerns and opinions of this group of children in relation to their family of origin. My assumption was that this age group would be able to participate in the study and be well able to understand what was going on.

The sample identified itself in many respects. At the time of selection there were 125 children in care, 58 of whom are in long-term foster care. The first step was to approach the social worker for the child. The children were selected at random and once ten names were offered by the social workers, the foster parents were approached (the birth parents where possible) and the children themselves. The following criteria for selection was used:

- **Age 10 or over.**

- **In long-term care.**

- **Available for the chosen dates.**

- **All parties being agreeable to the participation of the young people in the research.**

- **Confidentiality was guaranteed.**

- **Agreeable to having the group audio and video taped for accurate transcription purposes.**

I interviewed each child in their current placement prior to the group to explain the nature and purpose of the group. This was followed by a letter again explaining what was previously discussed. Because of my association and identification as a team leader for these children, it was decided to hold

the groups in the university and a family centre in order to stress my role as researcher. (For a profile of each of the children and young people please see Table 1). The children were escorted to and from the groups either by myself, their social workers or foster parents. Two foster parents took the afternoon off work in order to facilitate the group. All of those asked responded enthusiastically. However, one foster parent, although agreeable to the first group, refused to allow her two foster children to attend the second group, as she thought the group "unsettled" them.

The first group consisted of eight young people - three aged 14, 15 and 16 respectively, while the other five were aged between 10 and 12 years. The young people were enthralled with Trinity College and took a keen interest in the technology. They experimented with the camera and recording equipment, and had a settling in period of about ten minutes whilst waiting for all the participants to arrive. A social work student and technician operated the equipment. The group was moderated by myself and a staff member of Trinity College. The mixed age group of children in care proved to be problematic as the younger ones got restless and were easily distracted by each other. Although giddy however, they reported a different and valid experience. The older ones treated the subject rather more seriously and engaged more fully in the process. Consequently it was decided to hold a second group consisting of older children in the late teenage years. To facilitate those who were working or in college, the group was held in the evening and in a family centre where it was considered more comfortable and conducive to the purpose of the group.

Analyses

Following the taping of the two group discussions, I compiled transcripts of the entire proceeding, amounting to approximately 20,000 words; my approach to the analysis of this material was, in the first instance, to read the transcripts a number of times, and to play back the audio tapes frequently. My aim was to gain familiarity with the overall picture of how these young people viewed their experience. The next step was to go through the transcripts thematically, identifying discussion which touched directly on the research questions. In doing this I used different coloured highlighters to identify different themes; for example, subjects' views on social workers or contact with family of origin. In selecting extracts from the transcript for inclusion in the findings chapter, I tended to opt for those who expressed themselves in a particularly clear and colourful way, while also aware of the necessity to provide balance by indicating which views were representative and which were relatively eccentric. An interesting example of unanticipated differences which fully emerged during the analysis, was that between the different age groups.

Limitations of the study

The study does not include the views of birth parents, foster parents and social workers. This dimension was beyond the scope of this study as it was considered too time consuming. It might seem audacious to claim that one can generalise from a research project with such a small number of subjects. However, while not randomly selected, there is no reason to regard this particular group as being in any way unrepresentative of all children in care in the Eastern Health Board area. Therefore, I believe that with some caution, the findings of this study are broadly generalisable.

Findings

The participants had a clear understanding of why they were received into care in the first instance.

> "Well, I found it out for myself... I always knew what the reasons were, but I was told first of all that they just couldn't look after me and then I went and asked me ma myself and she wouldn't tell me...

Then I found out off Tom (social worker). He told me but I wanted to hear me ma say it for ages and in the end she sent for me... and told me the reasons. Me ma and da were drinking with loads of friends - me da went to hit me ma and me ma's brother-in-law jumped in and he got a wheel brace and he hit me da across the head with it - me da fell against - you know those marble fire place things... He smacked his head and he died - he would of been brain damaged; after that me ma kept drinking and she left us on our own in the house. The whole lot of us - and there wasn't enough food or nothing and then someone reported us and then social workers came and brought us to a home..."

"I remember we were taken from our ma. I was brought to a home wearing red shoes and a brown dress and they took them off me and I never got them back."

Reflecting on the reasons why she came into care she told the group:

"Yeah, I know it happened. It's still hard to believe but I know it's the trust. I was very close to me da. I was his favourite and all... Sometimes it does your head in and you don't care anymore. I'd still prefer to know though. I'd hate to be living a lie... You can get on with your life when you know what happened, and sort out your problems."

Alcohol abuse within the family was a common reason described by the children and this was linked to other family difficulties.

"Because me mam had a drinking problem... she had loads of problems... because she was put into foster care herself when she was twelve because her own mam and dad died. In the home they didn't show her how to love. So she didn't really understand how to look after children and she just went the wrong way in life. So at that stage when she did have kids they were literally just taken off her because of her drinking problem and because she had no stable home."

They were less clear about the length of time they were to remain in care. In fact most were confused about this, and had to sort this out for themselves when, after a passage of time, it became clear that they would not be returning home.

Children's expectations about how long they would be separated from their families and remain in care:

One boy said

"I thought I'd be going home but after a while I knew that it just wasn't going to happen".

Another boy said

"I thought I'd be going back to me ma, I thought that for about a year; no one told me I wouldn't be going back, it just didn't happen that was six years ago."

One girl added

"I didn't know if I was going to be staying there for the rest of my life or what... I was a bit confused - had no idea at all of what was happening."

Dora knew she would be in care for a long time but she did not recall anyone telling her. Se·n said he'd be in care *"all the time, I know that I'd never be going back to me mam"*. Dora said that *"I knew that I'd be in care a long time - no one ever said it to me. I just knew. I don't want to be back"*.

All believed that it was desirable to know about their birth family and to maintain contact with parents and siblings.

The group participants varied in their experiences of contact with their birth family. In a general sense all participants suggested that contact with family of origin i.e. birth parents or/and siblings was desirable. Some of the younger respondents, however, were quite ambivalent, regarding contact as an imposition. The contact varied from none at all to every two weeks. However, having knowledge of their family of origin was important for all group members. The above points are illustrated by the following statements from group participants:

One girl told the group

> "I've no idea who my birth father is, and me mam is dead. The only contact I have is with me younger brother and me older sister - they're both in fostering... I had no contact with my mother whatsoever, no phone calls no letters. I was trying but she died."

Another girl aged 19 who has been in care 18 years described the following:

> "I have five brothers and sisters - they are all in England in separate homes... I only met my grandmother once. We arranged to meet my mother but it fell through and it just didn't happen... I have a picture of one of my brothers. I would like to meet them."

All of the children in the group with the exception of one who is an only child come from families with two or more children in them. Carol told the group that despite efforts from same social workers to establish and maintain links with birth families some foster carers may attempt to block this process. She is aged 15, her mother is dead and she does not know who her father is. She has two siblings, an older sister and a younger brother in care in separate foster families. She has been trying for years to meet them. They are very important to her. Referring to her sister she said:

> "Her foster family is blocking us, they are so protective of her! But they don't know when they are in the wrong... They're saying we're not letting her go and see me, but she's 16 years of age... there's no sort of freedom there. The (foster father) won't ever let her go into town on her own to meet me, he wouldn't let her come over to my house... He read me letters that I wrote to her. There is no privacy there now at all."

Despite these obstacles, this girl persisted in establishing and maintaining contact with her sister whom she had not met or seen until just two years ago. She added that she is "always on the phone to me". About her younger brother she said that she "hadn't seen him in a long time, that's nothing against him that's my fault".

Some of the group maintain more contact with their siblings than their parents. Contact with siblings, particularly for one child appeared to be the most important emotional and psychological contact, even more so than that with her mother. Speaking of her mother she said that she is "just kind of another person to me, she wouldn't be anything special like". In speaking of her two younger sisters Sarah aged 14 and Julie 13, she said that she would be more like "their mother than their sister - it was like I kinda reared them in the home". The intensity of her feelings for her younger sisters and her insight into her own situation was revealed to the group. She said that some people who do not receive love either in their own family or in a children's home "don't bother giving it" (love). But she described her commitment to her sisters in the following terms:

> "I give every inch of anything I have in me to Sarah and Julie. I'd give my life for them... It doesn't matter how far away I am from them they know that I am always there and all they have to do is pick up the phone."

Table 1 – profile of group participants

Name	Age	*Reason in Care	Years in Care	Placed with Siblings	Contact with Siblings	Contact with Birth Parents	Nature of Contact	Number of Placements	Number of Soc. Workers
Theresa	19	1	19	No	No	No	N/A	1	5
Carol	16	2	16	No	Yes	N/A	Visits, phone calls, letters.	1	4
Helen	15	2	11	No	Yes	Yes	Visits, phone calls, letters, overnight stays.	4	8
John	16	2	12	Yes	Yes	Yes	Visiting in birth and foster homes.	1	4
Kate	14	2	12	Yes	Yes	Yes	Visits in birth and foster homes.	1	4
Sean	11	4	7	No	Yes	Yes	Visiting in foster home.	3	4
Martin	10	4	6	Yes	Yes	Yes	Visits in birth family home.	1	4
Dora	12	3	7	Yes	Yes	Yes	Supervised visits in health centre.	4	3
Joan	11	4	10	No	Yes	Yes	N/A	1	3
Mary	10	1	9	N/A	N/A	No	N/A	1	3

* Reasons in Care:
1. Teenage mother with drink problem.
2. Multiple family problems.
3. Sexual Abuse
4. Neglect

One boy was moved by this statement and he felt able to describe how he cries himself to sleep at night. Six months earlier his foster placement of seven years with his sister was disrupted. He is now separated from his sister for whom he grieves alone and he feels unable to share his loneliness. He told the group

"when I left the last family I was with my sister... when I think back some nights I just get upset... I don't get any warning, tears just keep coming... I cry myself to sleep most nights."

The younger children, between 10 and 14 years were less keen on contact, and felt they were *"made visit"* their original family by either social workers or foster parents. This group wished to identify themselves with their foster family and not to be seen to be different in their present locality.

In contrast with the above participants who described the strong desire for contact, the younger members of the group aged between 11 and 13 indicated that they felt compelled by their social workers or foster parents to maintain contact, whether they liked it or not.

Mary was most adamant about her refusal to meet both her birth father and mother. In fact she had persuaded her foster parents and social worker to defer contact for a period of three months. She said *"I don't like going to me ma and da, (I go) every month, but I don't like it"... it has stopped now until Christmas.* Mary went on to describe how she felt anger at her parents for parting with her and she was reminded of this at each visit.

Ciara told the group that she visits her mother every two weeks; *"I don't want to go back and live with her, but I want to go back and visit... why... because she's me ma".*

The child's perception of the social work role

Social workers emerged in a positive light from the experience of this group. The social worker was the person identified as the one they would turn to when in crisis or when they needed answers or help.

The older group berated social workers for not making them maintain contact with their birth family when they were growing up. They felt they had lost an opportunity for years of contact that they would not now be able to make up.

"My social worker says he'll organise a visit, he keeps going on and on about it saying he'll have to. He has been saying that for years but nothing happened... I think social workers tell lies."

Describing the important role his social worker occupied for him John, said:

"Even if your foster parents is telling you things - just always check it out with your social worker... your social worker will always tell you the truth."

These sentiments were endorsed by Helen, when she said:

"When the social worker comes along, I give them stick. I just laugh at them - but I look on them as my best friends. Being moved so many times they've always been there to help me move and so far it's been to good places even though I've caused all the trouble - they've moved me to good healthy homes - I wouldn't like to go into no home where I was bein' beat or anythin' - like they checked it out before - they haven't just moved me - they checked everything out - and they... finding out what the

house was like and then comin' back and lettin' me know - and if I like it I like it and I'll say yeah I want to go and if I don't like it they've tried their best."

One girl explained:

"I wouldn't have been able to get contact with my brother or sister without social workers... if it hadn't been for social workers I don't know who else would have got me the contact. I wouldn't have got the information about me background if it hadn't been for social workers."

One boy had a negative experience - he believed that his social worker told lies and did not follow through on promises made. They were unanimous in their feelings of hurt, rejection, and being "let down" when they had a change of social worker. They all agreed that social workers were *"always late"* for appointments, and that they used jargon a lot, which made communication difficult.

Finally, I wish to leave the last word to the young people themselves. When the group was asked how they felt about participating in the research, they responded positively.

One girl said:

"It was a good idea, 'cause you're sorta seeing people that's in the same situation as yourself. And then you'se are finding out how we feel, and more or less what it's like for us - instead of always seeing it your way - like you're not assuming what it would be like for us - but you'se are finding out for yourselves how we feel and what it's like, and that's good."

References

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- Morgan D. (1988) *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research: Qualitative Research Methods Volume 16.* Sage Publications: New York