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Drawing, sounds and play: understanding children’s viewpoints and participation

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Before starting fieldwork for my PhD research on eating habits in the early years, I had never worked closely with children, let alone conducted ethnographic work with them. In preparation for this new experience, I read a vast amount of literature about child-centred research methods. I was quickly captivated by the different strategies that childhood studies scholars, sociologists, geographers, and anthropologists have developed over the years to bring children’s voices to the fore in academic, as well as mainstream, debates. It was particularly inspiring to join their call to “integrate children into a more multivocal, multiperspective view of culture and society” (Bluebond-Langer and Korbin, 2007), an exciting, if challenging, prospect. It also rapidly became clear that I would have to rely on several research methods, so that my very young participants could find the most suitable ways to express themselves when engaging with me.

After a year, I collected more data than I could have hoped for: drawings on paper plates, sound clips from photo-elicitation and storytelling activities, countless observations of mealtimes, as well as the many conversations the children and I had at the table, or whilst playing—the amount of valuable information I gathered continues to surprise me as I now write my thesis. However, as this new phase of the PhD evolves, complex questions have emerged. How can I convey children’s accounts and lived experiences in an authentic manner? How can I analyse the results of the child-centred methods I used to theorise what was communicated to me? And how can these voices be integrated into the much broader context my research is situated in?
The answers to these questions became a lot clearer during the one-day Making Connections workshop, which took place in early November. Learning about multimodal analysis reassured me that different types of qualitative data can be intertwined effectively to explain and contextualise our participants’ viewpoints. In particular, the organisers’ work on idioms of childhood (Nolas, 2015; Nolas et al, 2017) has provided me with a framework with which to argue that data generated by children should be taken seriously and at face value. Given that the workshop was hosted within one of the exhibition spaces created as part of the Connectors Study, we gained direct experience about the various forms these childhood idioms can take. The exhibition showed how photographs and drawings created by children (alone or with the researchers), play behaviour, and mapping and ‘issue sorting’ activities were all used to collect children’s insights on what they thought of as meaningful about their lives. These were also considered channels through which children’s understandings about public life could be appreciated, and through which their engagement with different political spheres could also be discerned. The strengths of conducting research with children over longer periods of time were also discussed. Constructing a dynamic portrayal of participants’ daily lives and perspectives provides an insight into the possibilities for societal change within a person’s lifetime, as well as how divergences are negotiated along generational lines.

On the day of the workshop, the organisers also shared some of their raw data with us. This was a very generous way to teach us about the complexity of conducting multimodal analysis when a using a vast amount of information. It was perhaps this aspect of the workshop that I found most useful. Having a space within which to discuss the messiness involved in piecing together and analysing data generated by children showed me that the project of elevating children’s voices and participation in society is not linear or straightforward. However, finding that I can theorise children’s modes of expression as emblematic of their worldviews (yet not in a way that could be considered irrelevant or ‘cute’) by using the notion of *idioms of childhood* was an important takeaway for me.
In the context of my own project, describing drawings, humorous table talk, or play behaviour as idioms of childhood adds validity to my conceptualisation of this data as depictions of what children deemed meaningful about food and mealtimes. In my writing, I had been struggling to justify using some of the things the children had shared with me that could be read as mundane or incoherent, like play behaviour in the nursery’s ‘kitchen corner’, or a boy’s stated preference of “blue pasta.” Yet, the notion of idioms of childhood highlights that imagination and performance are also inherent components of children’s way of communicating. It is my role as a researcher to make these instances intelligible by piecing them together and linking them to the rest of my ethnographic data, and to integrate these perspectives and lived experiences into the broader context of children’s food policy, family dynamics, and institutional eating.

Children’s forms of expression are often not immediately recognisable to adults, or are at times outright dismissed. I believe that developing a methodology and theoretical approach that recognises these mediums of communication as significant will bring us closer to the ideal of a society that includes children’s voices and participation to a much larger degree.

References


Further Reading:


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