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Qualitative Research

vol. 3(2): 207-227. [1468-7941 (200308) 3:2; 207-227; 034211]

'Never work with children?': the geography of methodological issues in research with children

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ABSTRACT Over the past decade, there has been an increasing interest in the methodologies used in research with children. Geographers have contributed to the growing body of research that highlights that children are not simply passive objects dependent on adults, but are competent social actors that make sense of and actively contribute to their environment. The growing trend to conceptualize children as social actors has profound implications for geographical research with children, most notably the development of more 'inclusive' and participatory research agendas and children-centred methodologies.

In this article, we draw upon two ongoing postgraduate research projects with children to discuss our experiences of adopting such innovative children-centred research practices and methodologies. In particular, we focus upon the contribution that a specifically geographical approach can make to the wider interdisciplinary debates about children-centred research. Therefore, we discuss the importance of recognizing the spatiality of research with children, and highlight the significance of the geography of methodological issues, by exploring the significance of both the spaces in which we conduct our research, and the spaces at the centre of our research. We also discuss issues concerning the representation of children in the process of dissemination.

KEYWORDS: *children, children-centred research, children's geographies, reflexivity*

Introduction: the new social studies of childhood and children's geographies

Until recently, children have not been a principal focus of academic research (James, 1990; Philo, 1997). Childhood has either been neglected by mainstream social theory, or subsumed within other more 'important' areas of

focus, such as education, or the family (Brannen and O'Brien, 1995; Corsaro, 1997). Much of this research has been criticized for conceptualizing children as incompetent, unreliable and incomplete, as mere objects to be studied (Hill et al, 1996; Oakley, 1994). Thus, children have rarely had the opportunity to speak for themselves in research. Rather their lives have been explored through the voices of adult proxies (Christensen and James, 2000; Jones, 2000). Although these adult proxies have often been professionals working in children's 'best interests', such welfarism and protectionism is also based upon the exclusion and control of children (Oakley, 1994).

However, the now classic study by Aries (1962) proved to be the forerunner to a set of new approaches to the academic study of childhood and children's lives, and new ways of undertaking research with children (Brannen and O'Brien, 1995; Corsaro, 1997; Mayall, 1994). This loose, but rapidly growing, collection of studies is encompassed by the term 'the new social studies of childhood'. The new social studies of childhood problematizes and transforms the 'natural' category of child into the 'cultural' (Jenks, 1996). Childhood is a valid social category of research. There has been growing acknowledgment amongst researchers of the principle of children's participation (Hill et al., 1996). Many research projects have adopted the premise that children, as social actors, are competent witnesses to speak for themselves about their experiences of, and perspectives on, the social worlds in which they live (Hood et al., 1996; James et al., 1998: 184). This focus has also led to new ways of engaging with children, characterized by 'negotiation not imposition', to develop research strategies that are 'fair and respectful' to children as the subjects rather than objects of research (Hill et al., 1996; Morrow and Richards, 1996).

This growing field crosses traditional boundaries of academic disciplines, drawing upon research from a wide variety of disciplines, including but not limited to sociology (Jenks, 1996; Prout, 2000), anthropology (Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Ennew, 1994; James, 1998), education (Alderson, 1995; Edwards and Alldred, 1999) and social policy and social work (McNeish, 1999) as well as geography. More specifically within human geography, during the 1970s key seminal texts began to explore the relationship between children and geography, such as Bowden (Bowden, 1972) and Ward (Ward, 1978). Many of these early and groundbreaking studies (e.g. Matthews, 1987; Moore, 1986) drew upon the research methodologies of environmental psychology, ethnography and participant observation. These highly descriptive accounts of children's lives (such as Bunge, 1973) gave a new ethnographic in depth perspective to research with children. Furthermore, the last decade of the 20th century also witnessed increasing geographical inquiry into childhood, reflecting an increasing curiosity in all forms of socio-spatial inequality and hitherto 'hidden' and 'neglected' geographies (Matthews et al., 2000; Philo, 1992, 2000). Now at the onset of the 21st century, children's geographies are gaining critical mass (Holloway and

Valentine, 2000). Geography is significant in the new social studies of childhood since 'space is never an issue of mere location' (James et al., 1998: 39). Space is not simply a neutral physical surface upon which social action occurs, but is socially produced in a variety of ways. Furthermore, space and place are significant means by which societies organize themselves and distribute resources (Pain et al., 2001).

It is possible to identify two main themes to the contribution made by children's geographers to the wider interdisciplinary new social studies of childhood (Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Matthews and Limb, 1999). Firstly, geographers have identified the importance of place. Whilst there are a set of well rehearsed debates highlighting that childhood is a social construction, constructed in different ways in different times and places (see James et al., 1998 for further discussion), it is true to say there has been more attention upon the historical rather than the spatial. A key contribution made by children's geographers therefore is to examine spatial variations in childhoods, on a variety of scales from the local to the global (Matthews et al., 2000; Sibley, 1991). Furthermore, geographers also contribute to the wider recognition that children are not an homogenous group, and childhood cannot be seen as independent from other social variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, class and other socio-spatial factors (Matthews et al., 2000). Thus, there is increasing recognition of the spatial diversity of children's experiences and the 'multiple realities' of childhood (Frones et al., 2000).

A second contribution to the new social studies of childhood is the geographical focus upon 'those everyday spaces in and through which children's identities are made and remade' (Holloway and Valentine, 2000: 11). Geographers and non geographers alike have begun to explore the everyday spatialities of the home (Sibley, 1995), the school, the street (Matthews et al., 2000) the after-school club (Smith and Barker, 2000), and cyberspace (Valentine et al., 2000). Geographers have mapped the increasing institutionalization of the everyday spaces of childhood. Institutionalized spaces, which are designed and controlled by adults, are based not only upon the protection of children but also power relationships of control, regulation and exclusion (Philo, 1997; Sibley, 1995). However, there is a growing body of geographical work detailing that children do not simply passively reproduce social structures and processes, but rather actively contribute to and influence their own lives and the spaces which they inhabit (O'Brien et al., 2000; Smith and Barker, 2000; Valentine et al., 2000). Acknowledging that children are social actors does not, however, deny that childhood as a social institution exists beyond, and influences the lives of, individual children (James et al., 1998).

Growing interest in childhood has generated a series of methodological innovations and issues concerned with conducting research with children (Matthews et al., 1998; Morrow, 1999). Research is a political activity that involves some form of intrusion into people's lives (Lindsay, 2000). General

methodological issues are refracted in unique ways in research with children, because of the particular social context of adult-child relationships, and most significantly the unequal power dynamics that constitute these relationships (Mauthner, 1997; Valentine, 1999). Research with children requires increased reflexivity and awareness of these issues on the part of the researcher (Davis et al., 2000; James et al., 1998). Reflexivity, as developed by feminist researchers and others from a variety of disciplines (see Reinharz, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Tooke, 2000), refers to 'the self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher' (England, 1994: 82). Used to mapping the relations between researcher and researched and the impact this may have upon our work, reflexivity can be seen as central to the process of undertaking qualitative research (Atkinson et al., 2001; Rose, 1997).

Whilst methodological developments in children's geographies have been influenced and informed by innovation and debate from other disciplines in the social study of childhood, more recently there have been a collection of papers which are beginning to draw attention to a specifically geographical analysis of research with children (Barker and Smith, 2001; Valentine et al., 2001; Young and Barrett, 2001). Rose describes how the field into which we step as researchers is landscaped with particular sets of socio-spatial processes (Rose, 1997). Thus geographers are beginning to map the spatiality of research relations and the impact this has upon the research process.

The following discussion of the geography of methodological issues in research with children draws upon two projects being currently undertaken in the UK as part of doctoral research. John's research investigates the spatial mobility of 4–11 year olds, and considers the impact of increasing reliance upon the car for children's mobility. The research is being undertaken in Buckinghamshire, an area with the highest levels of car ownership and use, and parts of Greater London that have the lowest. Susie's research focuses on children's spaces of citizenship and social exclusion in rural areas. She is principally examining the potential role citizenship education could have on social inclusion. The ongoing research is being carried out with young people aged 13–16 years, and is being implemented through a case study on the Isle of Wight. Both research projects aim to develop a children-centred approach to research. As one way of achieving this, we both adopt innovative and inclusionary children-centred qualitative research techniques, such as photography, diaries, drawings and in depth interviews, as well as observation (for a more full discussion of the development of children-centred research methods, see Matthews et al., 1998; Young and Barrett, 2001). This reflects the growing use of multiple methods to undertake a variety of ethnographic and qualitative studies within anthropology and other disciplines (Atkinson et al., 2001; Reinharz, 1992). In the spirit of the interdisciplinarity of the new social studies of childhood, this article draws upon a wide variety of both geographical and non geographical literature.

Rather than providing an exhaustive and already well documented overview of methodological issues, we draw upon our two research projects to discuss the geography of methodological issues in research with children. We argue the need to consider the spatiality of research relations in three different ways. Firstly, we examine the various 'spaces of research' in which we have collected data. From school to home to radio station, we argue that the space in which research is undertaken has significant impact upon the research process. Secondly, we discuss some of the methodological issues involved in undertaking research about particular places, such as 'the car' or 'the rural'. We discuss the methodological issues concerning asking children to represent their own experiences of 'researched spaces' without visiting them ourselves as researchers. Thirdly, we also consider the 'spaces of dissemination'. We discuss issues concerning the representation of children and young people in the process of dissemination.

SPACES OF RESEARCH

Our research has been undertaken in a number of different spaces. As geographers, we must strive to reflexively analyse how the spaces of research may impact upon the research process and the data we produce. Our use of different spaces to talk to children enables us to compare and contrast the geographies of working in these different spaces. In this article we explore the spaces of the school and home and Susie discusses her experiences of conducting innovative research through a radio broadcast.

Schools are highly significant spaces and times in the geography of children's lives (James et al., 1998). Despite being places in which children spend a great deal of time, they are spaces over which children have little or no control. Children are controlled and organized according to specific institutional processes, principally by age (Fendler, 2001). Both Susie and John have conducted research in these highly institutionalized and controlled spaces. Geographers have also begun to map the 'homely geographies' of the domestic sphere (Philo, 2000). Homes have their own micro geographies with sets of familial power relations (Sibley, 1995). The domestic space of the home is not simply a private sphere but is increasingly linked to public spaces through the proliferation of media broadcasts and home use of the world wide web (Valentine et al., 2000). John conducted part of his research in the domestic space of the home.

One methodological issue illustrating the significance of space is the process of gaining access to work with children. In schools, gaining access to undertake research with children is often a complex and lengthy process. Institutions have a wide variety of gatekeepers, including parents, relatives, headteachers, local governors and local education authorities, who are entrusted with children's welfare and will make the initial decision whether researchers may talk to children. Within the institution of the school, there are often hierarchical networks of negotiation, including the school secretary,

the headteachers, governors, parents and members of staff (Valentine, 1999). Often these individual gatekeepers have different issues and priorities that need to be addressed. Negotiating access is therefore a process requiring researchers to be prepared to address any issues that gatekeepers may raise. Our experiences of negotiating access to research with children through schools reflect these similar processes. We both have been involved in 'the politics of access', through lengthy negotiations with schools. John's initial research aim considered the spatial mobility of a specific age group of 7–11 year olds, working with specific primary schools operating innovative 'Safer Routes to School' programmes. However, following initial meetings with headteachers it became clear this aim was not to be realized, as an extract from John's observations of one meeting explains:

> I met with the headteacher today. I went into school with a clear idea what I wanted to do. I talked the project through with the head. The head's interested, but in order for the project to be of use for them to monitor their progress (with the Safer Routes to School programme) I would need to work with the entire age range of the school. The head also wanted additional questions asked. We discussed this quite openly. I know all the debates about applied geography, reciprocity in the research process, about feeding back to your respondents and contributing to communities. I believe in that. But during our discussion I felt we were less than equal partners – after all, it was the head's school, not mine . . . I'd walked through the echoing corridors, I'd sat outside the headteacher's door for 10 minutes, the headteacher had sat behind that large imposing desk . . . the head had all the power. So partly because it's fair to attempt to do useful research, of relevance to your respondents, and partly because I was the outsider with little alternatives, I agreed. . . .
>
> (Diary Extract, September 2001)

Thus, the series of negotiations prior to gaining access required John to broaden the scope of his project. The head teacher, positioned within the school environment with its own set of socio-spatial expectations and processes, was powerful enough to redefine the entire research project. John also contacted children through the family home. Many commentators state that gaining access through the home may also be a long drawn out complex process (Matthews et al., 1998). It is commonplace to read that parents may see researchers as intrusion, and do not want such a public examination of their own private space (Valentine, 1999). However, John's experience of negotiating access through the parental home highlighted significant spatial variations between home and school, as his observations describe:

> I've been phoning asking parents if they and their children might like to take part . . . after the lengthy discussions getting into schools, I was prepared to answer a barrage of questions, to have to initially meet parents at school . . . but it's been so straightforward. You ask parents, they say yes or no. If they say yes, they invite you round their home to meet everyone . . . it's negotiating access with individuals, rather than institutions.
>
> (Diary Extract, November 2001)

Thus, the process of gaining access through the domestic space of the home was often much more simple and straightforward. Parents made decisions very quickly about participation, requiring basic information about the project to make their decision. As John's observations suggest, in most cases, gaining access through the home required negotiating with one individual, rather than an entire institution with its sets of hierarchies and expectations. However, this is not to say that families themselves are not complex social groups without sets of power relations. Without exception, asking fathers in two parent families to make decisions about participating in the project was problematic. Fathers claimed it 'was not their decision' and deferred such responsibility to their female partners. This re-enforced the perception that the overall responsibility for childcare and organizing children's lives is seen as women's business. There were some striking similarities between the position of fathers and school secretaries, as gatekeepers referring the decision to someone else. However, one key difference is that whilst school secretaries are seen as at the bottom of an institutional hierarchy, fathers in two parent families are often positioned more powerfully within families.

These examples of home and school demonstrate the power that gatekeepers wield in terms of affording access to children. In these situations, the researcher often loses autonomy and control of the research. The 'politics of access' often requires a lengthy process of negotiation and compromise on the part of the researcher, as they liaise through entire complex networks of gatekeepers before asking a child whether he or she would like to participate. Within institutions such as the school, researchers are positioned within a set of wider social processes over which they have limited knowledge and little control (Ansell, 2001). We have also identified that the process of gaining access to work with children is not aspatial. Rather there is a complex spatiality in the politics of access, requiring researchers to be aware of the context and geography of research.

One way in which we have endeavoured to create a more children-centred research process is through attempting to ensure confidentiality for respondents. Children's geographers have attempted to treat children with the same level of confidentiality as adults, although there are many specific and additional challenges in maintaining confidentiality, relating to children's position in society and the spaces in which children spend their time (Matthews et al., 1998). Ensuring confidentiality in schools conflicts with wider institutional processes of surveillance and control. Susie's research included a questionnaire survey, asking both qualitative and quantitative questions addressing young people's views on citizenship education, and discussing issues and spaces they felt excluded from within their communities. Ensuring confidentiality within the school was difficult, as extracts from Susie's research diary illustrates:

> . . .students appear to be reluctant to answer some of the questions relating to the use of 'out of bounds' or 'forbidden' spaces. Several ticked 'yes', and then

> scribbled it out again. I assume that some kids did this because they didn't want to disclose their activities to their teachers. . .. My assumptions have been reinforced! One teacher just commented that he had checked through some of the questionnaires to see if they had answered the questions properly!
>
> (Diary Extract, November 2001)

Thus, Susie's attempts to maintain confidentiality had been ruptured by the seen-as-legitimate actions of the teacher. This echoes France et al.'s (2000) experiences where teachers felt they had a right to know what the children had said in interviews, and so highlights the institutional surveillance that schools can place upon the research process. Researchers must maintain confidentiality and resist adult pressure to disclose the details of the research situation, without offending the adults in question (Masson, 2000). Susie had to find an innovative, ad hoc solution that would ensure confidentiality for the children but would not jeopardize her relationship with the school gatekeepers:

> I've attempted to rectify my confidentiality problem with the questionnaires by giving each pupil a sticky label. They will be able to fold their questionnaires in half and secure their answers inside before giving them to their teachers. . .
>
> (Diary Extract, November 2001)

Although the process of organizing questionnaires that could be sealed was time-consuming for both Susie and the teachers in her school, the majority of questionnaires were returned sealed and this approach appeared to allow children greater confidentiality.

Finding a quiet and confidential space within a school to conduct interviews is problematic. Researchers must not underestimate the scale of wider concerns over children's safety. Researchers must protect both children and themselves by adopting 'cautionary practice' which ensures they are not the sole adult in a closed room with children (Cameron et al., 1999). Thus, an interview may be conducted within view of other members of staff or children. Susie, however, was allocated a classroom for all her discussions:

> I went to see [teacher] and he allocated me a room for the week. It is a small classroom overlooking the library. . .. The room was set out fairly formally so I've moved a couple of chairs and tables and arranged four sets casually around one table. The table will be useful to put the tape recorder on and spread out the photos.
>
> (Diary Extract, 2 July 2002)

Before the start of each set of interview discussions Susie gave the young people the option to rearrange the classroom to their own design. No changes were made by any of the children and Susie felt quite reassured that she had attempted to restructure the school space into a less formal setting. She photographed her alterations (Figure 1).

However, Susie's response to the photograph revealed limitations in redefining the space of the school:

FIGURE 1

> I got my photos back today! I was excited to see the changes I'd made to the classroom but was seriously disappointed as it still looked very much like a classroom. It was a bit less formal but all the ingredients of the school were there.
>
> (Diary Extract, July 2002)

Despite Susie's attempts to create a children-centred space of research, the photo clearly shows the dominance of the institutional structure of the school. However, Susie did feel that attempting to negotiate the layout of the space with the children was symbolic in demonstrating that she did not mean to be in charge of the discussion but aimed to adopt a more egalitarian approach to the process.

Morrow and Richards (1996) highlight that finding private or quiet space to conduct research with children in the home is also often problematic for many reasons. Whilst the location of the interview must be both quiet and comfortable for the researcher and the child(ren), one must also recognize the child protection issues as discussed above. Thus, although children-centred and quiet, children's bedrooms are not the ideal place for research. John's experiences of creating confidential space contrast with Susie's experiences in the school environment. On many occasions John was offered 'too much' privacy in respondents' homes, as these notes highlight:

> Last night, another set of interviews with a child at home. After I'd introduced myself and the project and asked both parent and child if it was OK to do an interview, the parent leapt up and said 'I'll leave you two alone'. She was just about to leave the sitting room and close the door, before I was able to ask them both if they would like Mum to sit in on the interview, or if not to leave the door

> open and pop back in. . .. I've devised all these strategies to be 'safe' and it's just not an issue for people at home.
>
> (Diary Extract, December 2001)

This proved to be a common occurrence. John's response to this was to try to maintain some privacy and confidentiality whilst also adopting cautionary practice through conducting research in a quasi-private space (such as the garden, the dining room), which can be observed but not overheard.

Our examples highlight a complex spatiality of privacy and confidentiality in the research encounter. Parents appear to give more flexibility and privacy to researchers at home than teachers in the institutional environment of the school. Parents conceptualize the domestic space of the home as more 'safe' for researchers to have private access to work with children. Whilst this is welcome in terms of methodology and validity in providing a private, confidential place, wider concerns over child protection mean this is highly problematic. It is paradoxical that working in schools Susie has attempted to create a space more private and confidential than the one immediately offered her, whereas working in respondents' homes John has actively encouraged the use of spaces less private and confidential than the ones offered to him.

Few research projects with children have used popular media. Recent work with children by non-governmental organizations have cited radio broadcasting as a useful mechanism in educating adults and children about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Communications Law Centre, 2002). Furthermore, children's participation in the production and implementation of radio programmes is seen as empowering. Susie developed an innovative method, using a radio discussion programme for children and young people on local commercial radio, to conduct research with children. The use of radio can be seen as part of a wider trend helping to connect the present and absent, or local and global through media such as the Internet and email (McGrew, 1996; Valentine et al., 2000). In an attempt to create children-centred research, two children from her case study school volunteered to accompany her into the studio to help lead a discussion and answer questions. The show was advertised by the radio station as well as around local schools, and was held during the holidays. The aim was that the children would set their own agenda, with some guidance from Susie and the DJ. The show aired at lunchtime, the regular time for the phone-in discussion programme.

Exploring the possibility of creating a children-centred space in this public/commercial forum, Susie soon realized the complex power dynamics between the DJ, researcher, callers and the children during the discussion. Susie's more abstract research aims frequently became specific local issues and were often dominated by the agenda of the DJ. The station also imposed some verbal controls, and was conscious of the legal issues involved in referring specifically to people or businesses. For example, one female adult caller complained about the local bus company, as a consequence of which the DJ felt compelled to defend the bus company:

Caller: It seems so unfair. They pay out all this money for the bus pass.
DJ: Mmmm. . . I mean, at the end of the day [Bus Company Name], of course is a business. It's a business, like any other business. If it doesn't get enough money to cover its costs . . .

(Extract from radio show, June 2002)

Susie's space of research was also often (re)defined, and controlled by the callers. Some callers had individual agendas, for example, to advertise an event or business. Although these were related to the interests of young people in some way, they often lead to an adult-dominated discussion. In the space of the radio station Susie had little control over what the callers said. Whilst this ideally would have enabled children to express their views, in reality it often gave adults the freedom to express theirs. Callers also challenged some of the principles Susie had tried to uphold in her children-centred research, such as using respectful and non-patronizing language. One elderly man attempted to ask the girls in the studio about their opinion on the local employment situation, but insisted on referring to them as 'kiddies'. The DJ attempted to correct the caller as he could see the girls were quite offended, but the caller continued to refer to the young people as 'kiddies' throughout the discussion:

Caller: Alright. Yeh, them two young children in there, well, kiddies, young ladies whatever.
DJ: Young ladies they are.
Caller: Young ladies . . .
DJ: Kiddies? One of them got their jaw (open) . . . her jaws just dropped to her chest!

(Extract from radio show, June 2002)

These two examples from the radio show serve to illustrate the difficulty of constructing successful children-centred research methods. Within the public space of the radio station, other adults were more successful at exercising power than children. Furthermore, in practice the ideal of children-centred research often conflicts with, or is challenged by, the everyday conceptualizations of childhood by gatekeepers, institutional leaders and members of the public.

RESEARCHED SPACES

As geographers, our primary focus was upon the specific substantive spaces upon which our research was focused. Our research projects focused on different spaces on a variety of scales. In considering children's everyday patterns of spatial mobility, John focused in depth upon the micro-space of the car, an increasingly significant social space for many children, while Susie explored children's experiences of rurality. However, in both projects we did not directly carry out our own ethnographies of the spaces we investigated. In the case of the everyday space of the car, John felt that the presence of an unknown researcher would have polluted the everyday social interaction. The mere

presence of the researcher would have altered the social dynamics and power relations of the space under study. Similarly, Susie did not want to alter the group dynamics of peer group interaction or influence the kind of activities or places the children photographed. In order to avoid these problems, we both decided on using methods which were not directly based on researchers' direct observation of a space, but rather methods such as drawings, photographs and diaries that enabled children to represent and communicate their experiences of the specific spaces under study. Children also have much more freedom using these methods, and become active researchers, collecting data on their own terms and with their preferred methods, with no spatial and temporal restrictions on their participation (Young and Barrett, 2001).

We have faced several significant methodological issues in our attempts to map specific spaces of childhood using these representations. During conversations with children, it became clear in John's research that what appeared to be 'children-centred' photographs taken by the children were sometimes not the children's own representations of spending time in the car, as these interview transcripts with children and their families highlight:

John: (discussing the photographs) . . .and what's this photograph of?
Fin (aged 7): traffic . . . more awful traffic
John: OK, and this one?
Fin: erm . . . I don't know . . . I didn't take that one
Mum: yes . . . you did . . . they're your photos. . .
Fin: No, you took that one.

(Interview, December 2001)

Rather than being children-centred, in this example the methods have failed to give the space or autonomy to children to represent the space of the car as they experience it. Given the complex power relationships in families, these methods can become influenced or controlled by parents. Thus, in attempting to overcome or minimize the power relation between researcher and child-respondent, in this case John has empowered the parent, rather than the child. However, power relations are not necessary static, but are more accurately characterized by fluidity and change (Ansell, 2001; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). Furthermore, gender, family relationships and other socio-spatial variables fragment the experiences of children, and create complex power relationships that impact upon the research process. Unlike John, Susie found that her respondents had been able to take photographs without influence or pressure from parents. Susie's respondents were older (13–14 years old) and hence had more independent spatial mobility and freedom to take their own photographs, as well as having more autonomy and independence vis-a-vis their parents and families.

John's interviews with children provide another example illustrating the contested position of children within family networks. Simple research questions highlighted and disrupted the exercise of familial power relations (Aitken, 2001). There were many examples of parents exercising their power

as adults to highlight children's assumed inaccuracies and clarify or correct their children's accounts. However, this is not to say that children were simply passive recipients of these power relations. Children also used the forum of the interview to disclose facts or practices of their parents, most notably parents' driving misdemeanours. These often served to embarrass parents, who then went into lengthy discussions to explain and justify their behaviour:

Cathy (aged 9): . . .sometimes Mum finds it hard, because we talk to her on the way there, Dad finds it easier because he's more used to driving. Mum sometimes gets distracted, and she might go through a red light by mistake.

Mum: (coughs) just one or two times. . .

(Interview, December 2001)

Leo (aged 11): In a way, I like the motorway, and in a way I don't. When I like it, I like it when I am really excited, going somewhere nice, we're usually in the Beetle, and Mum breaking all the speed limits on the motorway. . .

Mum: (voice from the kitchen) No, I'm not!

(Interview, February 2002)

Similarly, some children became concerned when they thought that their parents were dominating the conversation of the interview. On several occasions, children interrupted to highlight this, as this example shows:

Jay (aged 8): I can't believe you're doing all the talking. It's my work!

(Interview, December 2001)

These examples serve to highlight that gathering data with children and parents can expose the negotiated and conflictual power relations present in families (Valentine, 1997). Both children and parents exercise power through the data collection process, and can subvert the research encounter and exploit the research agenda for their own purposes. Researchers are always working within families with their own complex sets of power networks and relationships, as Aitken (2001) notes that when working with families the researcher is 'positioned . . . at the margins of unfathomable sets of interpersonal politics' (Aitken, 2001: 74).

Susie found that enabling children to represent their own life worlds through methods such as photographs and diaries can have unintended consequences, in this case challenging the researchers' own conceptualization of their researched space. Susie spent her childhood in her case study area, grew up in a small village, and perceives the Isle of Wight to be 'rural'. Furthermore, the Countryside Agency defines 'the rural' as a place with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants (Tucker and Matthews, 2001), and Cloke and Edwards' Index of Rurality defines the Isle of Wight as either 'rural' or 'extreme rural' (Cloke and Edwards, 1986). According to these definitions, only one settlement on the Isle of Wight marginally exceeds this category of 'rural'. However, the children's representations of their localities challenged

this. Many children who had spent all their lives on the island regarded small towns as very much urban, and related ideas of rurality to agricultural land outside of where they live. Bob lives in a seaside town with a population of 5299 (1991 census):

Susie: . . .so do you feel like where you live is the countryside or it is more like an urban area?
Bob (aged 13): Its . . . er an urban area.
Susie: Yes. Yeah . . . and if I said to you, like ummm.. (Pause) describe the countryside, what kind of words come to mind?
Bob: Well, there isn't really any countryside in [Bob's town].
(Discussion with 'Bob', 4 July 2002)

Bob challenged Susie's perceptions of what constitutes rurality and by doing so redefines the physical boundaries of her case study. This echoes contemporary rural geographers' call to embrace diversity and explore different notions of ruralities (Cloke and Little, 1997). This example illustrates that children may not simply use the research methods in the manner in which researchers assume, but in children's own ways. Although not anticipated or intended, Bob's challenge to Susie's perceptions of rurality meant he exerted his own influence and power on the research project.

Thus, our attempts to create meaningful, valid and accurate representations of children's spaces through children-centred methods have not always been successful. Whilst we strive to give space and autonomy for children to express themselves and represent their everyday spaces, we must be aware of limitations to this. The wider social context within which children live their lives impacts upon the research process. Existing power relations in families are complex to map and difficult to circumvent. Schools and other public arenas present their own ethos, protocol and practices that may find children-centred ideals alien. Simply put, sometimes our children-centred methods have failed to empower children, but rather adults.

SPACES OF DISSEMINATION

Dissemination is an often overlooked part of the research process. The process of analysing data and disseminating information is mostly undertaken by the adult researchers, who select which voices to include in the analysis and dissemination of research. Rarely are children involved. Researchers unavoidably draw upon their 'adult knowledge' and adult preconceptions (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Qvortrup, 1994). Susie faced one such example that makes visible these adult preconceptions. In Susie's research some children felt very strongly about their social exclusion in rural communities, and expressed their sentiments in what is conventionally understood as 'bad language':

Susie: Does it feel quite urban, like a town here?
Agnuz (aged 14): Yeah.
Loki (aged 13): Its mixed. There's tons of big fields. We go and play man hunt in 'em,

> but the old people, I think it's the farmers probably, all walk their dogs through and tell us to like clear off. They tell us to 'F' off and 'go away you little fuckers'.
>
> (Group discussion, July 2002)

Susie faced what Murphy and Dingwall (2001) identify as 'crisis of representation' during the presentation of a conference paper. The apparent absence of 'bad language' in the dissemination of academic research led to Susie's dilemma whether to include or exclude children's accounts solely on the basis of whether they contained 'bad language'. This parallels Holland's (2000) observations, which note the greater credibility given to the voice of a child who is seen as 'sensible'. To reproduce children's accounts in their own voices and bad language would create what Murphy and Dingwall (2001) identify 'messy texts', as well as challenging stereotypical conceptions of children's innocence.

Disseminating research is a highly complex task in relation to the representation of language, and research with young people often requires an understanding or insight into the alternative languages of youth. The boys were well aware of the significance of the language they were using and frequently smiled or gasped when one said something they were not used to freely saying to an adult without reprimand in school. Such discourses are often localized and geographically-specific. Moreover, this issue becomes more problematic when children's accounts move beyond the realms of 'bad language' to the offensive. When asked 'Who do you think makes the important decisions in your community?', in a written questionnaire survey, one 14-year-old boy responded with:

> 'The gay village council who don't have a clue, just make money and try to be arseholes (they succeed)'.

Such dilemmas have been encountered by, for example, Horton (2001), who whilst working with primary school children wrestled with whether he should challenge offensive language. Herein lies a conflict between the academic conventions that determine the dissemination of research, and children-centred research that promotes the diversity of children's methods of communication. Susie realised that whilst providing feedback with 'bad language' would be a more authentic representation of the children's views, it may offend parents, teachers or policy makers who as a result may not take these views seriously, or who may well refuse access to further research. Furthermore, the bad language would only represent some children's views, and would not represent the majority of respondents, especially the girls taking part in Susie's research. Thus, accurately portraying the graphic views of some children may well place the researcher in a position of conflict of interests. There is a conflict between representing the views of some children and maintaining relationships with other significant adults such as parents or teachers. Producing a poster to disseminate the results to the school, Susie did not use any of the 'bad language', but has chosen to discuss it in this article,

since there are no repercussions for the children. Thus different languages are used to represent children in each space of dissemination.

Another methodological issue concerning the representation of children in the process of dissemination is the use of pseudonyms. To give the children more of an involvement in the research process, Susie asked her respondents to choose their own pseudonyms. The children selected their names early on in the research when they were completing diary entries about their social inclusion/exclusion in the countryside. Most chose their own nicknames or Internet chat room identity. Later on in the process when discussing the diaries, Susie also showed her respondents how their voices could be disseminated in the academic world. She used a special 'Geographies of Childhood' edition of the journal *Area* to illustrate how photographs and quotations from diaries, interviews and discussions are used in relation to pseudonyms. As a result just under half of the young people involved in the research then chose to use their real first names. Some felt that the research would be taken more seriously without the use of pseudonyms. Thus, giving children choices to elect to use their own names was consistent with developing a children-centred methodology, as well as allowing them to increase their participation as researchers (Tapsell et al., 2001).

Conclusion

Children's geographies is an increasingly important sub-discipline of human geography, drawing upon and contributing to the growing inter-disciplinary movement identified as the new social studies of childhood. One of the key aims of this movement is to develop mechanisms promoting children-centred research, creating an opportunity for children, in their own voices, to discuss their experiences of their lives. The particular social context of adult–child relationships means that many general methodological issues are experienced in unique ways in children-centred research. Thus, wider concerns about children's safety, combined with unequal adult–child power relations and a 'duty of care' of the researcher, results in a highly sensitive and unique research encounter with children. Children's geographers have responded to this challenge by engaging in situated thought and reflexive discussions, developing new methodological insights concerning accessing respondents, confidentiality and power relations in the research process.

Geographers have also begun to map the spatiality of research relations with children. Indeed, in this article we have indicated how we have experienced the geography of methodological issues. Thus, each individual methodological issue such as confidentiality is refracted and experienced in unique ways in each particular place in which we carry out our research. Rather than simply being a physical location, the place of research influences and permeates our attempts to develop children-centred research. It is clear from our own experiences that in many cases children-centred research is an ideal,

rather than reality. Each individual space and place, with its own sets of social processes and power relations, impact upon and limit our attempts, as well as offer us possibilities to create children-centred research.

Our reflexive discussions of the spatiality of methodological issues may appear disappointing to those attempting to create children-centred research. For postgraduate researchers with varying degrees of experience of undertaking research with children, our ideal of children-centred research has been replaced by a more grounded, reflexive awareness, which points to the limitations of our endeavours. It is certainly ironic that whilst as researchers we attempt to empower children, we often find ourselves empowering other adults, rather than children, in the places in which we conduct research. Whilst we attempt to represent the voices of children through data collection and dissemination, reflexive analysis of our experiences questions whether these representations are authentic. Despite our attempts to place children at the centre of research, the research process is influenced by, and embedded within, both our own situations and positions as researchers, as well as the specific places in which we conduct research, and all the wider familial and institutional power relations within those spaces. Thus, Rose (1997) highlights a need for 'reflexive thought (that) looks both "inward" to the identity of the researcher, and "outward" to her relation to her research and what is described as the "wider world"' (p. 309). Thus, as researchers attempting to develop children-centred research, we must be aware and openly discuss these limitations. Our reflexive thought enables us as researchers to gain glimpses, however partial, of the opportunities and connections, and the limitations and barriers, provided by our own situatedness as researchers, and of those that develop in relation to the wider familial and institutional spaces in which we undertake our research.

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