

THE SECRET LIFE OF KIDS: WHAT METHODS ARE NEEDED TO RESEARCH CHILDREN?

As sociologists, our job is to study societies and the experiences of people who live within them. Much of this can be done at a distance—or without coming into contact with the ‘object’ of your study. In this approach, studying children is easy. At least, it is pretty similar to studying adults. The differences in age, vocabulary, intelligence and a vast range of other factors do not matter.

A study on children and education in this context could take published data about exam grades and undertake a quantitative examination of this material to look for differences according to geographic region. Similarly, a study could examine a child’s weight, the amount of physical exercise they undertake and their family’s social class to look for links between these issues.

In all of the above examples, the differences between children and adults do not impact on the data that is being analysed. But if you are seeking to understand children’s lived experiences, or explore the social dynamics of their friendships, things become methodologically much harder. We know that children have different cultures than adults. Think of a time a child you know has taken great pleasure from a joke that does not really make any sense, or played a “game” that does not connect with most adults in any way. British TV station Channel 4 even has a programme dedicated to filming the friendships and interactions of 5, 6 and 7 year olds in British schools (with the parents’ consent) precisely because the different ways children interact is entertaining and interesting to us.

As such, the far lower vocabulary and intelligence that children in general have compared to adults means that traditional methods like qualitative interviewing will not be as effective. Sociologists of children and childhood have come up with a number of ways of dealing with this issue.

Barrie Thorne, an American feminist sociologist, wrote a ground-breaking book called *Gender Play* that demonstrated the gendered nature of the way in which children interacted (Thorne 1993). She showed children do not just passively adopt gender roles, they are active and agentic in developing them. While her findings are fascinating, so too is the methodological approach Thorne pioneered.

Part of this was the recognition that children do not normally use age-generic terms in talking about each other, but preferred to use “kids” when encouraged to use a term to describe themselves or

their peers. Thorne found that when she used the word “children” to describe her (young) participants, the word evoked an “adult-ideological viewpoint” whereas the term “kids” enabled her to think more from their perspective. This more ‘kid-friendly’ perspective has also been thought of as the “least-adult” role (Mandell 1988).

The least-adult role is not an easy role to adopt. Bronwyn Davies (1989, 37), for example, highlights that it is difficult as an adult “to participate in this subtle, shifting complex world of childhood relations”. Similarly, Debbie Epstein (1998) emphasises how using a vocabulary that is accessible to young children can be tiring and not always even possible, and she highlights how the structure of schools repeatedly re-inscribe the differences between the researcher and the child. There are also ethical concerns about the extent to which children can truly consent to research, and how appropriate it is for parents or teachers to grant consent for them.

Others have talked about the problems in engaging with kids at their level. In researching her book, *Bad Boys*, on how American public (government-funded) schools were racialized in problematic ways, Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) highlighted another issue in collecting data with children. As part of her ethnography, she would interview black male youth at her university. Yet she noted that the formal interviews would often not provide that much interesting data—it was only after the interview, when she gave these boys a tour of her university campus, that they started to spontaneously disclose the stories of their lives that were most important to them.

Ferguson also wrote about how her experience researching children transformed her perspective on research methods:

I assumed at the start that I would learn about kids; but it was not long before I was obliged to question this premise and begin to learn from children. This enabled me to see their story from a fresh viewpoint.

If sociologists patronise children the way adults in general do in everyday life, sociology will fail to capture the intricacies and intimacies of kids’ lives. But when sociologists treat children as individuals who have their own cultures and ways of interacting, the methods of sociology can be used to understand the distinct lives of young people.

References

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