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Children's participation in research: some possibilities and constraints in the current Australian research environment

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This paper draws attention to a number of critical issues that exist in the current Australian research context which simultaneously enable and constrain children's participation in research. These include prevailing understandings of children and childhood, the emerging research assessment environment and the ethical frameworks that regulate children's involvement in qualitative research. The discussion is framed by a number of questions that remain unsettled for the authors as they attempt to pursue research with and for children and young people that is unselfconsciously focused on 'improving' rather than 'proving' the social conditions that shape their lives.

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The past decade has witnessed a fundamental shift in understandings about children and their place in social and political life. Now, more than ever before, children[1] are viewed as social agents whose views and perspectives are deemed critical in the creation of social institutions (families, schools, legal systems and the like) that are responsive to them. Such recognition has been accompanied by a growing interest in how children can be researched and theorized

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[1] For ease of reading, the term 'children' will be used to describe both children and young people. However, this is not to diminish the important distinctions that exist between both categories of person.

which has, in turn, drawn closer attention to the ethical and methodological issues related to child research.

The question of how children can be involved in research remains contested ground, primarily because it is a deeply ethical endeavour that implicates researchers at every level of the research process. The developing focus in recent years on how to undertake sound, respectful research that is relevant to the lives of children is increasingly being overshadowed by a number of 'bigger picture' questions and concerns. These seem to be pointing to an entanglement of child-inclusive, participatory research practices with broader moral imperatives, political tensions and theoretical dissonances that constitute current institutional discourses of both 'research' and 'ethics' (Halse and Honey 2007). So, for example, whilst it is widely acknowledged that the very concept of research is characterized by competing discourses that create and sustain the boundaries of what makes for 'good' research, there is growing uncertainty about what types of studies will be funded, what kinds of data will be collected, and what 'evidence' will be considered useful in policy recommendations (Lincoln and Cannella 2004). As an "essentially contested concept" (Lister 1997:14), concerns abound as to whether research that seeks the views and perspectives of children through methods such as interviews, focus groups, drawings, diaries and the like, constitutes 'good' research. Likewise, the notion of 'ethics' is a complex construct since it, too, is imbued with particular values and beliefs that influence how we approach our research. 'Doing ethics' surely involves adherence to procedural requirements but it also strongly reflects a values orientation in terms of the issues that are privileged as part of this process (Somerville 2006). How ethics is conceptualized, then, is instrumental in shaping the conditions and possibilities for children's involvement in research.

Against the backdrop of such reflections, this paper provides an overview of the evidence pointing to the importance of children's participation in research, whilst also signaling a number of critical issues that limit and/or resist their involvement. In particular, the paper highlights concerns regarding the prevailing emphases associated with research assessment exercises and the ethical frameworks which regulate children's involvement in qualitative research. Whilst the discussion refers to issues pertinent to the Australian research landscape, and in particular, to sociologists working in the area of childhood studies, those undertaking research with children in other Western countries, for example, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, will undoubtedly find resonance with their own contexts.

Why involve children in research?

The impetus to involve children in research reflects one or more of a range of philosophical and theoretical commitments aimed at better understanding and describing children's experiences (Greene and Hill 2005). In essence, contributions across various fields and disciplines, including those briefly described below, reflect a growing acknowledgment of children as persons in their own right and as worthy of recognition, respect and voice. Their participation in research is akin to respecting and promoting their entitlement to have their opinions heard. It assumes that they are persons of value, their experiences are of interest to themselves, and to others, and that they have a valuable contribution to make to social and political life (Neale 2004; Smart 2006; Smith 2007; Taylor 2006).

From a *sociological perspective,* attention is focused on children's capabilities to actively contribute to and shape their everyday lives (James and Prout 1997; Smart, Neale and Wade

2001; Smith, Taylor and Tapp 2003). The experience, status, rights and wellbeing of children are central to the field of Childhood Studies (sometimes referred to as the 'new' sociology of childhood), which asserts that children are articulate and insightful commentators on their own lives and their perspectives point to a diversity and particularity of experience and their active engagement within it (Flowerdew and Neale 2003; Taylor 2006). Qvortrup has famously described this conceptual interest as approaching children "as human beings rather than as human becomings" (1994: 4). More recently, Neale and Flowerdew have described children as "beings *and* becomings" (2007: 26), a description which conveys a deeper recognition of their current status as well as their continuing development. Children are now regarded as subjects, not objects, of research reflecting a significant shift away from traditional conceptions of children as irrational, incompetent, vulnerable and unable to know their own best interests (James and Prout 1997).

From a *human rights perspective*, involving children in research vindicates the right of children to have a say and to be heard, as afforded to them under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). A reasonable interpretation of Australia's endorsement of the UNCRC in 1990 is that children can put forward their views, and represent their interests, in the expectation that they will be listened to and respected (Cairns 2006). As Grover (2004: 90) says, "allowing children to be active participants in the research process enhances their status as individuals with inherent rights to participation in society more generally and the right to be heard in their authentic voice". This is not to say the interests of children are the same, or that their views should be afforded any special status, but that, like any other citizen, they are entitled to be heard and taken seriously (Hogan 2005). Adopting a human rights perspective draws attention to the idea that participation is more

than just a powerful interest and envisages that children have rights to be listened to and their views taken into account.

From a *socio-cultural perspective*, including children in research reflects a view of children as active and dynamic, whose ability to be a citizen does not emerge with biological growth, but is nurtured by social experiences and interactions with others (Neale 2004). In particular, socio-cultural perspectives emphasise that "for children to learn to speak up and voice their opinions, it is important for adults to create participatory spaces and to provide support and guidance in partnership with children, in order to help them to formulate their views" (Smith and Bjerke in press). Relevant to this discussion is the socio-cultural concept of 'scaffolding', which refers to the guidance and interactional support given to the child by more skilled adults or other peers who act as 'scaffolders' to aid the building of the child's understanding (Smith 1998; Taylor 2006). According to this view, any participatory process should involve the child moving from spectator to participant and, with the support of the more competent other, gradually acquiring mastery over the task. Research is thus understood to be a collaborative process which acknowledges the active role of children in their development while, at the same time, recognizing that the potential of the collaboration is influenced by the individual characteristics of research participants, interpersonal factors and the broader historical and cultural context of the research setting (Tudge and Hogan 2005).

In addition to the influences described above, the impetus to include children in research has been prompted by a growing body of theoretical and empirical research which signals some important links between children's participation and their wellbeing. Children tell us that they want recognition and acknowledgment as individuals with opinions and feelings of their own and as able to constructively contribute to and shape decisions made in their everyday lives

(Parkinson and Cashmore 2008; Kjørholt 2004). Researchers cite participation across any number of contexts (planning, service delivery, policy evaluation, legal decision making) as helping them develop a sense of belonging in the community, gain new skills and experiences, meet new people and friends and build a sense of their own agency (Cashmore 2003; NSW Children's Commission 2006; Taylor 2006). Ultimately, these benefits translate in terms of children's own sense of wellbeing and as something "that contributes to children's positive development of individual identity, competence and a sense of responsibility" (Kjørholt 2004: 19). As Mathews (2003: 270) argues, children's participation is an "essential moral ingredient of any democratic society - enhancing quality of life; enabling empowerment; encouraging psycho-social well being; and providing a sense of inclusiveness".

Such views signal the critical importance of participation because it affords *recognition and respect*, which as Taylor (1995: 226) argues are 'vital human needs' and hence integral to children's well-being and positive development (Honneth 1995; Graham and Fitzgerald 2009). Children's participation in research contexts, particularly in qualitative research that invites children to dialogue, is thus crucial in that it allows the views and experiences of children to be considered in policy debates, and thus to potentially influence policy outcomes. An important implication of all of the influences noted above is that research is done '*with* children rather than *on* or *about* them and, in the process, to give their views legitimacy' (Smart et al 2001:14).

In considering the participation of children in research, it is also important to take into account the body of research examining the relationship between *misrecognition* and its implications for children's sense of identity and well being (Graham and Fitzgerald 2009).

According to Lister (2008), there is evidence to support the case for acknowledgment of the psychological dimensions of misrecognition of the identity of individuals. Viewed from the standpoint of recognition, children's participation is not just about a process of listening to children, hearing their voices or accessing their views, experiences, fears, desires and uncertainties: it holds out possibilities for children to discover and negotiate the essence of who they are and their place in the world. As Taylor (1978:47) has observed "making sense of one's life as a story is…not an optional extra…our lives exist also in this space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer."

In the same way, when we invite children to participate in research we also gain insight into their experiences of being marginalized, unheard or misrecognised - experiences which are central to the development and implementation of well-targeted policy or practice responses that might more effectively support their social and emotional well-being. Research, then, plays a critically important role in elevating children's voices into the spheres of public policy and practice, where planning and decisions concerning their lives are largely determined.

In the following section we focus on two issues that are currently shaping the recognition of children in the current research environment. The first concerns the possibilities and constraints that accompany research assessment and research performativity. The second relates to the ethical context for research involving children, which is largely framed in Australia by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

Children's Involvement and the Research Assessment Environment

There is now an air of inevitability surrounding research assessment and its role in increasing research performance in Australia (Carr 2007). Given the funding imperative tied to research assessment exercises, these will no doubt "drive behaviours" in Australia, just as they have in other countries such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Yates 2005:391). One of the legacies of such behavioural change may well be that some types of research are privileged or marginalized in the interests of improving rankings and funding performance.

The model and criteria currently being implemented in Australia through the 'Excellence in Research for Australia' (ERA) initiative points to an anticipated emphasis on quality, impact and research intensity. Whilst the change of Federal government at the last election brought with it some softening in approach (impact is now positioned as 'applied research' and as 'translation of research outcomes') the language of 'quality' and 'impact' is undoubtedly now the established vernacular for Australian researchers - a development not to be uncritically adopted given that the language we use as researchers to describe our work and aspirations is not a peripheral issue (Fielding 2003). The main debates have centred around what will 'count' in evaluating quality research, as well as what will transpire in terms of the resourcing and funding of research. There will undoubtedly be a need for continuing vigilance about the privileging of research approaches which value quantitative, experimental design studies for producing knowledge to the exclusion of other more qualitative approaches. Despite the more recent modifications to the framework aimed at reducing such an effect it is critical that we remain attuned to the subtleties embedded in the assessment process.

When we think about undertaking research that sets out to engage children in conversation and dialogue about things that matter to them or, in the language of Fielding (2003), research that values listening, receptivity, experience and complexity, it is quite apparent there may be a few challenges in store when it comes to progressing the status of such research. In any environment that conflates 'excellence' with competition, incentives, comparison, benchmarking, scale, efficiency and improvement, we would do well to monitor closely whether such developments might act to exclude and/or marginalize the participation of children and young people in research, and subsequently to limit the capacity of institutions to be responsive to their needs and interests.

A key interest for those seeking to include children in research, then, concerns the 'impact' agenda, particularly given the renewed emphasis on interdisciplinary applied research, collaboration with children and young people and the linking of research with education and advocacy activities. Research impact is, of course, essentially about relevance and accessibility (Yates 2005). It relates to the benefits of research that extend beyond academe to the wider community. In the context of the current discussion, this means assessing whether research that includes the voices of children and young people can survive in a research environment where measuring and assessing children is privileged over children's reports of their 'self-beliefs, their understanding of themselves as learners and their identities as people' (Pollard and Trigg 2001: 273).

If indeed it is the case that research assessment exercises result in a "premium placed on speed, on the readily measurable, on the desire to replace rather than refashion, on telling rather than listening, on assertion rather than receptivity, on surface appearance rather than

depth of experience, on simplicity rather than complexity, on single loop rather than double loop learning, and so on" (Fielding 2003:291), there may be little place for the kind of dialogical approaches central to participatory research that require time, training, resources and a disposition to accommodate the complexity and ambiguity of children's accounts. That such approaches might result in demonstrated outcomes linked to social benefits is beyond question.

It is important to emphasise that what we are talking about here is not about resurrecting well-worn debates about research paradigms, but rather to highlight an underlying concern linked to *ethics*. The process of research is a fundamentally ethical endeavour in that 'quality' research is not just about carefully designed, randomized testing of children's lives but also about the processes of respectfully engaging in dialogue with children such that it is possible to 'co-construct' and report their views and experiences as they make sense of the world. Most importantly, as Grover (2004:83) emphasises, it is during the research process that children are afforded a "right of correction" and there is a need to "offer children the opportunity to define themselves through collaboration in the research effort, rather than to be defined solely by adult interests, biases and agendas". Indeed, the very idea of 'co-constructing knowledge' implies that we, as adult researchers, open ourselves to the possibility of change in response to what it is that children tell us.

When Thomas and O'Kane (1998:336) suggest that "bad science is bad ethics", the implication is that ethical assessment includes consideration of whether a) the research questions are worth asking and b) the research methods are an effective way of answering them. Including children and young people in such decisions must surely go some way towards building foundations for research that are both relevant and accessible (i.e. addressing

impact) as well as being deeply ethical. The Australian ethicist Margaret Somerville (2006:25) puts it another way:

> It's not enough for an outcome to be ethically acceptable or even desirable; the means used to achieve it must also be ethical.

It is to this issue of the potentially problematic status of children within dominant ethics paradigms that we now turn our attention. If we take the research process as a site of ethical practice in the way we have just described, then it soon becomes apparent that a number of barriers exist to further progressing research that affords children the opportunity to contribute to its impact. It is at this point that we encounter another paradox. In an era that is increasingly recognizing the agency of children and their capacity to participate in research we are also witnessing an increasingly 'nervous' regulatory environment in relation to research ethics committees and children's involvement in research processes.

Competing Ethics: Promoting the Inclusion of Children in a Risk-aversive Research Environment

The last few years have witnessed the escalating regulation of research concerning children. In Australia, the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* is the overarching policy governing research with children, and there is now a comprehensive section outlining the ethical protocols that must be in place before research with children can

proceed.[2] Institutional compliance with the National Statement is required by the *National Health and Medical Research Council Act* (1992) and monitored by the Australian Health Ethics Committee.   Compliance is both an employment condition for researchers and a prerequisite for the receipt of national research grants (Halse and Honey 2005). Yet, as the following discussion shows, at a time when there is increasing recognition of the value of giving children a say about the issues that shape their lives, the ethical frameworks that facilitate their involvement in research are providing fewer opportunities for them to do so. As an identified 'vulnerable group', children and young people draw a particularly intense gaze from ethics committees as they negotiate the complex space between protecting children from risk and providing an opportunity for their participation.

This resistance to children's involvement is evident in a number of different ways. The first concerns the definition of children and young people in the National Statement. Children are defined as minors who *lack* the maturity to make a decision whether or not to participate and young persons are defined as minors who *may* have the maturity to make a decision whether or not to participate in research, subject to law in the relevant jurisdiction.   Implicit in these definitions are a number of assumptions about children and young people who are conceived in passive terms of *what they are not* - the proposition that children *lack* capacity implying traditional and universalistic notions of children's capacity which conceive of children as also lacking autonomy, rationality and responsibility.

The privileging of this particular interpretation of children's capacity, while central to democratic traditions which assert that individuals have a right to the freedom to make their

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[2] Australian Government, *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans Guidelines*, 1999, Appendix 3.

own choices and to take responsibility for their own life, rests on presumptions about competence that are not traditionally understood as extending to children (Lansdown 2005). The NHMRC National Statement therefore provides researchers with a highly ambiguous starting point - children are defined as lacking maturity to participate in research (and young persons as potentially lacking maturity), but guidelines are nevertheless provided for undertaking research with children. Such ambiguity is further complicated by reference to an interpretation of the terms 'child' and 'young person' as being subject to the law in relevant jurisdictions. Researchers who seek to involve children in research can only assume that an evaluation of a child's *maturity* (or lack of) should be interpreted in light of jurisprudential interpretations of legal *competence* by reference to jurisdictional factors such as the age and circumstances of the child and the nature of the decision to be made.

In Australia, courts determine a child's legal competence according to the decision of *Gillick v West Norfolk and Wisbech Area Health Authority and the DHSS* ([1986] AC 112). 'Gillick-competence' stipulates that a competent child is one who "achieves a sufficient understanding and intelligence to enable him or her to understand fully what is proposed" and has "sufficient discretion to enable him or her to make a wise choice in his or her own interests" (Morrow and Richards 1996: 95). In Australia, it seems that while all children are assumed by the National Statement to lack *maturity*, this does not mean that they lack the *competence* to consent subject to legal definitions of competence, which might take into account age, maturity, context and the nature of the decision making task. However, there is no further clarification or direction in the Statement as to how either maturity or competence are to be defined, who is to assess a child's maturity, nor how such an assessment should determine whether the research is in a child's best interests.

Secondly, conceptualising children as 'lacking maturity' invites presumptions that they are at risk and vulnerable to exploitation in the research process and therefore in need of protection. This is evident in the attention directed at undertaking 'risk assessments' - that is the weighing up of the risks and benefits of involvement in research based on an assessment of their limitations and vulnerabilities. This new 'ethics of risk', whereby research ethics involving children is increasingly subjected to heightened regulation and surveillance, is part of the ascendancy of a precautionary sensibility, or 'culture of fear', which Furedi (2009:200) argues 'encourages society to approach human experience as a potential risk to our society'. Under the guise of 'the best interests of the child', the assessment of 'risk' arising from involving children in research falls under 'an imperative of avoidance' (Beck 1999:141) which also acts to hide fundamental assumptions about 'who' the child is, with the consequence being a privileging of children's rights to protection above their rights to participation. The point here is not to suggest that children's participation in research should be assumed or that children's participation in research will always be beneficial or safe. Children's participation should never be assumed in any context (for a fuller discussion on the limitations and challenges of involving children in research, see Cook-Sather 2007; James 2007; Komulainen 2007; Percy-Smith and Thomas 2009) Rather, the intention is to caution against gatekeeping children out of research purely on the basis of potential risk to them. Such assessments, which at times appear to be more about managing risks to universities and institutions than about managing risks to children, are potentially inconsistent with children's right to be heard, and fail to acknowledge the protective potential of participation, a function Lansdown (2006: 149) describes well:

By failing to listen to children, the adult world can be blind to the reality of children's vulnerability to harm. Adults cannot protect children without understanding their experiences.

Thirdly, the National Statement sidelines the substantial body of theoretical research which argues for a rethinking of concepts such as competence and maturity, so as to accommodate the notion of children's *evolving capacities*. According to Lansdown (2005), an approach to participation based on an understanding of children as having 'evolving capacities' opens up three conceptual possibilities: firstly, as a developmental concept, recognising the extent to which children's development, competence and emerging autonomy are promoted through the realisation of their rights; secondly, as a participatory concept emphasising the right of children to respect for their capacities; and thirdly, as a protective concept, which acknowledges that because their capacities are evolving, they have a right to protection from harm (Lansdown 2005). The concept of evolving capacities shifts the focus away from a deficit model of capacity, and the identification of harmful risk factors that accompany the application of such a model, to a strengths-based model looking for those features which are helpful and supportive of children's participation (Flowerdew and Neale 2003). To do so, however, requires a fundamental shift towards a relational ethics, whereby concerns about competence are considered alongside the extent to which the child might be supported to make an informed decision. This approach to assessing competence is consistent with that of Bessant (2006:4), who argues:

The fact that a young person may in some way be less able than others or that they may need assistance (i.e. have something explained to them), does not mean they

cannot or ought not decide for themselves, nor does it entitle others to deny them that

basic right.

Finally, critical attention should also be given to the particular focus a 'risks and benefits' assessment brings to children's involvement, often at the expense of a concerted focus on the ongoing nature of ethical considerations, challenges and dilemmas that may arise at any stage of the research process (Cashmore 2006; Powell and Smith 2006). Taking children's views and perspectives seriously draws attention to a certain kind of ethical practice—one that has to be comfortable with the provisionality and messiness that listening, reflecting, interpreting and engaging with children in conversation and dialogue inevitably bring (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). When research is guided by an orientation towards children's self-understanding, the individual agency of each child—their competence, determination, dependency and vulnerability—does not determine their inclusion or exclusion from the research, but rather *informs the conditions* in which their inclusion takes place. Yet, in an ethical environment already uncomfortable with research practices that are messy (and so difficult to regulate) the irony is that less attention is directed to the dimension of *ethics in practice*, or to the way ethical decisions are actually reached in research, as opposed to how they could be decided. In other words research practice is considered to be 'ethical' if researchers adequately show they have analysed the risks and benefits of children participating in the study. When the approval of research is inextricably linked with a comprehensive 'risk assessment', what is deemed to be ethical research will be reduced to a "performance by researchers: the ability to fill out forms in an approved way, to deploy 'ethics speak' as required, and to couch a research project in the language of scientific objectivity" (Halse and Honey 2007:344). When put together, it seems ethics policy and approval procedures are increasingly gate-keeping

children out of research, particularly in relation to 'sensitive' issues, effectively creating a situation whereby children's participation is positioned in terms of a 'last resort'.

Such concerns do not constitute an argument for the abandonment of the legislative and ethical frameworks that are critically important in guiding the ways in which we undertake and judge research conduct. Nor are these an attempt to promote a 'moral relativist' approach to ethical decision making whereby ethics simply becomes a matter of the individual researcher's personal determination of children's involvement in research. Instead, the intention is to prompt further thinking about what new and/or different approaches to ethics might be required to facilitate the development of respectful and accountable ways of engaging children without overcoming or silencing their participation, in both research and practice. How can we develop more sophisticated approaches to the protection of children's best interests as "a dynamic process in which adults take responsibility for keeping children safe by listening to and respecting their perspectives, while empowering them to contribute to their own protection"? (Lansdown 2006:149)? What happens if, as researchers, we resist the dominating, organizing categories that stand in opposition to issuing an authentic invitation to children to participate in research? These are questions that challenge the "instrumental rationality and business ethics that permeate contemporary discourses of children's services" (Moss 2006: 191). Such questions are critical however, if we are to avoid what Cockburn (1998) describes as a 'Catch 22' situation where children never have the chance to gain experience in participation and decision-making, and are maintained in positions of immaturity and incompetence.

Conclusion

The concern of this paper has not been about progressing the abandonment of research assessment, current ethical frameworks or diversity of research methodologies. Effective and responsive policy for children and young people rests on the rigour and relevance of research regardless of methodological preferences or approach. Instead, the paper has sought to highlight both the importance and complexity of children's participation in research and to signal the challenges facing researchers pursuing methodologies that facilitate such involvement. Attention has been drawn to the need for reflecting critically on how researchers construct children and childhood and how such constructions facilitate or limit the possibilities for including children in research. Critical questions have been raised as to whether current approaches to research assessment and to ethics work effectively in fostering inclusion. In doing so, it is suggested that caution be applied in appropriating new, old or emerging methodological approaches that lay claim to legitimizing the 'truth' about children's experiences and posit, instead, a need for vigilance in relation to the underlying moral values and worldviews which inform the ethical acceptability of a project. Subsequently, whether research involving children features strongly in A* and A ranked journals, and whether the NHMRC Framework acts to facilitate or constrain such research, may have far reaching implications in terms of future possibilities for improving policy and practice with and for children.

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