

You Know What They Know: An Autoethnography of Working with Child Participants

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Abstract

The present study explores the experiential avenues of working with children as research participants through a critical lens. Using the qualitative method of autoethnography, the article captures the unique characteristics of working with children in research given the socio-political contexts of adult-child interactions. The thematic descriptions resulting from analyzing extensive field notes and anecdotes from the experience as a researcher try to highlight the challenges faced during the process. The study challenges adult-centric assumptions, and suggests strategies that lead to more effective and relevant policies and interventions. Including children's perspectives also fosters their sense of agency, reduces power imbalances, and captures the diversity of their experiences.

Keywords: Child participants, Qualitative Research, Autoethnography

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between adults and children is a complex and multifaceted dynamic shaped by historical, social, political, and cultural factors. Understanding this relationship requires examining the way societies construct childhood, power dynamics, and the roles of various institutions, such as the family, education, and the state.

Historically, the concept of childhood has evolved significantly. In pre-modern societies, children were often seen as miniature adults, expected to take on responsibilities and roles within the family and community from a young age. The concept of childhood as a distinct phase of life emerged more clearly in the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly in Western societies. Philosopher John Locke's views on education and childhood as a "blank slate" shaped Enlightenment thinking, emphasizing the importance of nurturing and educating children as a responsibility of adults.

As societies industrialized in the 19th century, the notion of childhood became more sentimentalized, with children being seen as vulnerable and innocent, in need of protection. This shift was accompanied by legal reforms, such as child labor laws, compulsory education, and welfare policies, which gradually limited children's economic roles and emphasized their need for care, education, and moral guidance. These developments laid the groundwork for modern ideas about the adult-child relationship, where adults assume a protective and nurturing role over children. (Berk, 2014)

One of the central aspects of adult-child relationships is the power imbalance that exists between the two groups. Adults typically hold authority over children, whether as parents, teachers, or caregivers, and this power is institutionalized in various social structures. This authority is often justified on the grounds that

children are vulnerable, dependent, and lack the cognitive and emotional maturity to make decisions in their best interest. (Estlein, 2016)

While this adult authority can be protective, it can also lead to problematic dynamics, such as the marginalization of children's voices, agency, and rights. The philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of power and discipline is useful in understanding how societal structures regulate children's bodies and minds through surveillance, control, and normalization. Schools, families, and legal systems often function as institutions of power where adults exercise control over children's lives, from their education and behavior to their bodies and even their futures.

However, in contemporary times, there has been a growing emphasis on children's rights and agency. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted in 1989, marked a significant shift in recognizing children as rights-bearing individuals, entitled to participate in decisions that affect them. This challenges traditional paternalistic views of adult authority and calls for a more balanced relationship between adults and children, where children's voices are heard and their perspectives valued. The adult-child relationship is also heavily influenced by cultural norms regarding family structures, parenting styles, and expectations of children's behavior. Different cultures have varying views on child-rearing and the roles of children within society. For example, in some collectivist cultures, children are raised with a strong emphasis on obedience, respect for elders, and integration into family and community life. In contrast, individualistic cultures may prioritize children's autonomy, self-expression, and personal development.

Parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful—illustrate how these cultural norms manifest in adult-child interactions. Authoritative parenting, characterized by a balance of warmth and control, is often associated with positive child outcomes in many Western contexts. However, authoritarian parenting, which emphasizes obedience and discipline, is more prevalent in societies where hierarchical family structures and respect for authority are highly valued.

Cultural norms also shape how children are socialized into gender roles, class identities, and racial or ethnic affiliations. For instance, girls and boys may be socialized differently regarding expectations around behavior, education, and future aspirations, reflecting broader societal gender norms. Children from marginalized communities, such as ethnic minorities or lower socioeconomic backgrounds, often experience adult-child relationships in ways that reinforce social inequalities, limiting their access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility.

Need for locating children's voices in research

Locating children's voices in research is essential for several reasons, particularly in fields related to childhood studies, education, health, and social sciences. Historically, children's perspectives have often been marginalized, with adults speaking on their behalf. However, acknowledging and including children's voices in research can lead to richer, more accurate, and ethically sound studies. (Kirk, 2007)

Children are not passive recipients of adult guidance but active participants in their own lives. They constantly interpret, negotiate, and make sense of their world through their own perspectives. Recognizing children as social actors means acknowledging their agency and the importance of their lived experiences. Including their voices in research allows for a more accurate representation of how they view, experience, and engage with social realities, rather than relying solely on adult interpretations. (Qvotrup, 2015)

Research that includes children's voices leads to more accurate and relevant data. Adult perspectives, while valuable, often miss critical nuances in children's experiences. Children have unique insights into their

lives, relationships, and the systems they interact with, such as schools, healthcare, and families. Including their voices ensures that research findings truly reflect their realities, needs, and challenges. (Qvotrup, 2009)

For example, studies on children's well-being, mental health, or education often reveal different priorities or experiences when children's voices are considered, such as their concerns about friendship, play, or feelings of stress that adults might overlook or misinterpret.

Historically, adult-centric perspectives have dominated research involving children, often leading to assumptions about what children need or how they think and feel. This can result in biased findings or policies that do not meet children's actual needs. By locating children's voices in research, we challenge these assumptions and give children the opportunity to shape the narrative about their own lives. This creates space for more authentic, child-centered research outcomes.

For example, traditional research on child development often emphasized developmental deficits or what children could not do compared to adults. However, by centering children's perspectives, research can focus on their competencies, capabilities, and strengths, offering a more balanced understanding of their development.

When children's voices are included in research, it leads to the development of more effective policies, programs, and interventions that are tailored to their actual needs and priorities. Children are directly impacted by policies in areas like education, healthcare, and social services, and their input is invaluable in shaping services that genuinely support them. (Woodhouse, 2012)

For instance, educational research that involves children's input can reveal how they perceive the learning process, what barriers they face, and what supports would help them succeed. Similarly, in healthcare research, children may offer insights into how they experience medical treatment, their fears, and how they would like to be supported during care, leading to more child-friendly healthcare practices.

Incorporating children's voices in research improves the methodological rigor of studies. It requires researchers to develop innovative, child-appropriate methods that allow children to express their views in ways that are comfortable and accessible to them. These methods may include creative techniques like drawing, storytelling, photography, or play-based interviews, which can provide deeper insights into children's perspectives than traditional adult-oriented methods.

Such participatory approaches also foster more inclusive research designs, making it possible to engage with children from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities, different cultural contexts, or non-verbal communication preferences.

When children's voices are located in research, it promotes their sense of agency and empowerment. Being asked to share their experiences and views allows children to feel that their opinions are valued and that they can influence decisions that affect their lives. This is especially important for marginalized or vulnerable children, whose voices are often silenced in broader societal contexts.

Empowering children to participate in research also fosters skills such as critical thinking, self-expression, and self-awareness. It encourages them to reflect on their own experiences and articulate their perspectives, which can have positive developmental and social impacts.

Children are not a homogenous group; they experience the world differently based on their age, gender, culture, socio-economic background, and other factors. Locating children's voices in research ensures that the diversity of children's experiences is captured, rather than presenting a one-size-fits-all perspective. This allows researchers to uncover differences in experiences among children and highlight the specific

challenges faced by particular groups, such as children from marginalized communities, those with disabilities, or children in different cultural contexts.

Finally, locating children's voices in research fosters greater intergenerational understanding. It allows adults—whether researchers, policymakers, or caregivers—to gain insights into children's perspectives, helping bridge the gap between adult and child viewpoints. This can enhance relationships between generations, as adults better understand children's needs, concerns, and aspirations, leading to more supportive and effective ways of engaging with and nurturing young people.

METHOD

Autoethnography challenges traditional research boundaries by valuing subjective, emotional, and lived experiences as valid forms of knowledge. By combining narrative with analysis, it highlights the interconnectedness of individual experiences and collective cultural practices, offering insights into how personal stories are shaped by, and contribute to, societal structures and norms. This method is especially useful for exploring identity, power, and agency in everyday life. (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010)

Critical theory, particularly as developed by scholars of the Frankfurt School like Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, seeks to understand how power, ideology, and social structures operate to maintain inequality and domination. A key concept in critical theory is the idea of ideology—the ways in which dominant ideas and beliefs justify and reinforce the existing social order. Critical theory is also concerned with the concept of emancipation—the idea that individuals and groups should be freed from oppressive social conditions.

Critical autoethnography is thus a form of qualitative research that combines personal narrative with critical analysis to explore broader cultural, social, and political issues. Unlike traditional autoethnography, which focuses primarily on the individual's experience, critical autoethnography explicitly addresses power relations, systemic inequalities, and social justice concerns. It encourages researchers to critically reflect on how their personal stories are intertwined with larger structures of oppression, privilege, and marginalization. By connecting the personal with the political, critical autoethnography aims to not only understand but also challenge dominant narratives and institutions, highlighting the intersectionality of identity, agency, and societal forces. This approach calls for a reflexive, engaged methodology that seeks to produce transformative knowledge and foster social change. (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020)

The present study delves into thematic representations of lessons learned on the field during the data generation phase of my doctoral research. Extensive field notes and recollections of memories served as my text for thematic analysis following the Braun and Clark tradition (Braun & Clark, 2006)

THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

This autoethnography is based on my field experiences in a school while collecting data for my post-doctoral research. The thematic descriptions mentioned below are both a result of extensive field notes that were taken during the time and recollections from the memory about the challenges and the hardships involved in working with child participants.

Obtaining consent

Obtaining consent from children in research presents unique ethical challenges, as children may lack the cognitive and legal capacity to fully understand the implications of their participation. While informed

consent from parents or legal guardians is typically required, it is equally important to seek assent from the child, ensuring they agree to participate in a manner appropriate to their developmental level. This involves explaining the research in clear, age-appropriate language so that the child understands what the study entails, their role in it, and their right to withdraw at any time. The process must respect the child's autonomy while safeguarding their welfare, recognizing that children, though vulnerable, are capable of expressing preferences and making decisions when given the proper support. Balancing parental authority with the child's consent is critical, and researchers must carefully navigate this to ensure ethical and respectful participation. Often at times we give parents or the caregivers this responsibility to decide about children's participation or withdrawal from a research study. While, one must do that and take appropriate consent from those in authority but at the same time children should be made as much part of the process as possible. Especially, in a research that is trying to deconstruct the existing notions of childhood and incorporate their voices in research and policy making.

Clark (2004) discusses the difficulties involved in obtaining informed consent from children, emphasizing the need to communicate information in a way that is appropriate for their age and developmental stage. This includes considering the child's cognitive and emotional maturity. Clark also underscores the importance of involving parents or legal guardians in the consent process, while simultaneously respecting the child's autonomy. Research has shown that young children can be reliable informants, offering valuable and practical insights (Evans & Fuller, 1996; Clark & Moss, 2011; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Wiltz & Klein, 2001; Einarsdóttir, 2003, 2005c; Warming, 2005). These studies affirm the belief that children, like adults, hold their own views and perspectives, have the right to be heard, and are capable of expressing themselves when appropriate research methods are used.

In my research, I tried to convert consent taking into a game with simple rules to be followed. These activities like memory games were similar in the dynamic to that of activities that were used for data collection. Only when the participants understood the rules and agreed to them were included in the research. Consent is a challenging concept for children to understand in the existing socio-political context where most of the decisions for them are made by adults in charge.

Cognitive prerequisites of being a participant

In scientific purview many things that seem obvious and regular with adult participants may present itself as an uphill task with the young ones. Cognitive prerequisites for participating in qualitative research involve a range of mental and developmental abilities that enable individuals to engage meaningfully in the research process. First and foremost is the ability to focus and pay attention. Engaging in qualitative research requires the cognitive ability to stay focused on the questions or activities for a sufficient amount of time to gather meaningful data. This may be more challenging for younger children or individuals with certain cognitive impairments. While there were no participants in my research with any kind of impairments, keeping the attentional resources on in child participants was a challenging task. Even the smallest of events like a bird in view could act as a potent distractor. Furthermore, children may find it difficult to be on track and sustain on a task like focus group discussions. Giving frequent breaks in between or adding filler activities to quickly refresh their cognitive capacities puts the researcher on an advantageous side.

In some cases, qualitative research may require participants to understand abstract or complex concepts (e.g., identity, social roles, or relationships). The ability to grasp these ideas is necessary for offering thoughtful and relevant responses. My participants struggled at times to comprehend what needs to be

addressed in a question. For example, there were often discussions on death and dying in my research while the children recalled their experiences from the Covid-19 pandemic. The responsibility as a researcher was then to make them comfortable with abstract concepts. Using child-appropriate language in research with children is essential to ensure that they understand the questions and feel comfortable participating in the study. This involves using simple, clear, and age-appropriate vocabulary that aligns with the child's cognitive and developmental level. Complex or abstract terms should be avoided, and instead, researchers should focus on concrete language that children can easily relate to their everyday experiences. Open-ended questions phrased in a child-friendly way encourage fuller responses, allowing children to express themselves more naturally. Additionally, tone and body language play a crucial role in making the child feel at ease. By adapting communication methods to suit the child's linguistic abilities, researchers foster an environment where children can engage fully, confidently, and authentically in the research process.

Data generation and the role of play

Play plays a crucial role when working with child participants in research, particularly in fields like education, psychology, and childhood studies. It serves as an effective medium for engaging children, allowing them to express themselves in ways that are natural and comfortable for them. Children often find it challenging to articulate complex emotions or experiences through words alone, particularly in formal settings. Play provides an alternative form of expression, enabling children to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives more freely. Whether through drawing, role-playing, or games, play encourages children to share their experiences in ways that feel less intimidating than direct questioning. In my research as I also mentioned earlier play and games helped me reach closer to children and resultantly in efficient use of multimethod data collection.

Children's cognitive, emotional, and linguistic development varies widely by age, making traditional research methods less effective. Play-based approaches, such as drawing, storytelling, or role-playing, align with children's developmental stages. These methods allow children to engage with research in a way that is suitable for their level of understanding and capacity for expression, leading to more accurate and rich data.

Children are naturally drawn to play, making it a valuable tool for maintaining their interest and engagement during the research process. By incorporating playful methods, researchers can capture children's attention for longer periods and gain more authentic insights. For instance, asking children to create stories with toys or draw pictures of their daily lives allows them to actively participate, making the research experience enjoyable and meaningful.

Research with children typically involves a power dynamic between the adult researcher and the child participant. Play helps to reduce this imbalance by creating a more relaxed and egalitarian environment. Through play, children can take on leadership roles, set the rules, or guide the activity, fostering a sense of agency. This allows for a more collaborative and respectful research relationship, where children feel valued and heard. I still remember the ambiguity at first when

Analyzing and report writing

In many of the challenges I faced, one was the constant fear of under-representing children's voices in my research. As their interviewer and facilitator during the field visits, each day was a learning experience. Sometimes, completely submerged in their idiosyncratic ways of telling tales of their daily lives, I could

feel the energy, witness their enthusiasm realizing little at the moment that children may oversimplify expressions of even intense experiences. The maturity here is to realize that it does not take away from the intensity of the emotion being displayed.

Children and so did the participants of my research have limited expression through words. Their sentences are short compared to elaborate and verbose accounts of adult participants. Limited vocabulary and syntax can make it hard for them to find the right words, especially for abstract or unfamiliar topics. Even simple emotions like sadness or fear might be described using broad terms like "bad" or "hurt." It may be attributed to the fact that their abstract thinking and understanding of complex ideas are still forming, making it harder for them to articulate feelings or concepts, such as illness or emotional distress. In the given scenario,

Additionally, in qualitative research analysis is grounded in the text. Short sentences can present tough situations to adequately support your findings. Short sentences can be vague or ambiguous, leaving researchers uncertain about the child's true intent. Without detailed explanations, it's difficult to interpret the nuances behind their words. Children may also assume the researcher knows the context of their statements, resulting in missing information that is crucial for analysis. These gaps require researchers to infer meaning, which can introduce bias or misinterpretation. Researchers such as myself may struggle to interpret brief responses, especially if nonverbal cues or additional context are not available. This can hinder the ability to draw meaningful insights from the data. One thing that helped was again using games and stories. Asking them to create stories around certain themes helped me as a researcher to gain insight into the contexts that these children tried to refer to. Sentences were not like the ones written or spoken by adult participants but they had enough gestures to be read between the lines.

Innocence Gap

One peculiarity that emerges while working with children is that more often than not you know what they know. This being said has deeper implications than just being a procedural matter. Number one, the adult-child gap perfectly paves way for establishing a hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. No matter how intended one is to bridge the two sides, the subtle dynamics can color the outcomes and distance children's worldview from the purview of adult-centric academia. For instance, in my research there were a lot of discussions around healthy food. The participants enthusiastically voiced their opinions and knowledge about what they know of healthy and junk food. In fact, in most of the group discussions on the field the notion emerged as a very strong dichotomy, with children advocating for a homemade diet as healthy. Reasons for this given by the participants were varied, from being hygienic to filled with nutrients and vitamins. However, given in the socio-political context of adult-child relationships it can lead to more attention to what is being said than how it is being said. Having more experience in life I knew more accurately and scientifically about the several nutritional values of food. While the participants spoke about their knowledge, at times the repetition of information felt like stagnation. This is an extremely challenging situation to work with. One can easily be entrapped in the same old cycle of children knowing less and adults knowing more hence adults must teach children correctly about various things. There is no denial that it should be done. However, one must examine the context in which this unidirectional teaching-learning process takes place. Especially in qualitative research that tries to bring the voices of the vulnerable to be heard more loudly in the academic world, listening itself is very political. Related to this, is the problem of internalization of the hierarchy by children. During my field visits, I was often referred to as ma'am or didi (elder sister) by the participants. Therefore, indicating that children too

consider themselves as being inferior to the authority in charge. Often during the data collection, the participants would seek for validation or feedback of how they have performed even when the task was not performative in nature rather experiential. Again this tendency can be attributed to the larger socio-cultural reality of the phenomenological gap between a child and an adult. This limits listening. Therefore the learning as a researcher here becomes the ability to develop keen interest on how things are being said more than what is being said. Adults and children are placed in the same socio-political cultural contexts however the lived experiences can significantly vary. As a researcher one needs to tap into these differences of experiential reality and highlight in true essence or at least in spirit the often lost voices of the 'weak'. This is easier said than done. It took me days to tap into the worlds of these children. One strategy that definitely works is to learn the child-appropriate language of probing. Probing is an art. If modified correctly can lead to wonders and if not can be very intimidating as a tool. Especially with children who are already as participants, under great apprehension of evaluation. The innocence gap as I call it is to acknowledge with respect the existential worlds of children. The lens with which we witness things as adult researchers can make observation blurry or even myopic. Thus emerges the need to correct the focal length of our sight. It is obvious once adulterated as adults we cannot return to the same innocent outlook but one can really try to break the power structure and begin viewing the research from a middle platform. It was challenging but a very valuable experience for me as a researcher having gone through the difficulties of working with children.

The new researcher

I never imagined research could change me so profoundly. When I first embarked on my study, I was a determined, though somewhat rigid, academic. Unlike my previous research experience, I emerged as a different individual personally

At the outset, my focus was on gathering data, coding themes, and making sense of the patterns that emerged from my fieldwork. I was disciplined, driven by the need to present findings that would advance my academic career. But soon, the voices of the children I interviewed and worked with began to seep through my academic detachment. Their stories of experiences of physical and mental health, family struggles, and daily resilience were more than just data points—they were raw, lived realities. And it was impossible for me to remain untouched.

Over time, I found myself engaging with the children differently. Rather than simply asking questions, I started listening—not just with the intent to analyze, but with the intent to understand. My carefully constructed academic barriers began to crumble. I was no longer just a researcher observing from a distance; I became a participant in their world. I began to see how the social issues I had previously studied in abstract terms—inequality, injustice, discrimination—were deeply intertwined with human lives, including my own.

As the research progressed, I started to reflect on my own identity. I had always considered myself an ally, someone who cared about social justice. But the distance I maintained between myself and the communities I studied now felt like a form of detachment, even complicity. I realized that my research, if it was to have any meaning, had to go beyond academic publication—it needed to connect to the lived realities of the people I worked with. I had to be more accountable to them, more vulnerable in my own understanding.

This realization fundamentally altered my approach. I began to question the purpose of my research: Was it just to satisfy academic curiosity, or could it serve as a tool for change? I became more committed to

making my work accessible to the communities I studied, ensuring that their stories were not just consumed by academic circles but used to advocate for policy changes and social support systems.

As the months passed, I emerged from the research as a different person. I had entered the project with the mindset of a detached academic, but I left it with a more profound understanding of myself and the world. I had grown as both a scholar and a human being, realizing that research is not just about producing knowledge—it's about connection, empathy, and accountability.

The children I met had given me more than just data; they had given me a new perspective on my place in the world. I was no longer just a researcher studying others—I was a part of a collective struggle for a more just and equitable society. My work, and my life, now carry the weight of that responsibility. In the end, it wasn't the findings that changed me; it was the people, their stories, and the lessons they taught me about resilience, hope, and transformation.

CONCLUSION

Children are not difficult participants. Adults are difficult researchers. Locating children's voices in research is essential for promoting ethical, inclusive, and accurate studies that reflect the realities of children's lives. It respects their rights as individuals, challenges adult-centric assumptions, and leads to more effective and relevant policies and interventions. Including children's perspectives also fosters their sense of agency, reduces power imbalances, and captures the diversity of their experiences. By prioritizing children's voices, research can contribute to a more just and child-centered understanding of the world. Hopefully this autographic account of my doctoral research journey would encourage future researchers to witness the beautiful world of our precious children by working *with them* rather than *on them*.

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