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**Lesser or just different? Capturing children's voices in  
consumer research**

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## Lesser or just different? Capturing children's voices in Consumer Research

Ben Kerrane

**Abstract** Child research has been conducted 'on' rather than 'with' children, and has often used parental proxies or opinion to account for the views of the child. Due to this the voice of the child has been unheard. Once access and ethical concerns have been addressed the adult researcher then has to decide which role to take when conducting research with children. Children are largely seen in one of three ways, and each perspective has an impact on the role the adult researcher could adopt. The first claims that children are entirely different from adults, and fosters the notion that they are unreliable and contaminated data sources. The second perspective views children as being entirely the same as adults, and the third views children as being similar to adults but as having different (although not necessarily inferior) competencies. The latter perspective has received most support and is the favoured view of the child respondent.

## Lesser or just different? Capturing children's voices in Consumer Research

### Introduction: Doing Research *with* Children

The sociology of the family literature has clearly detailed the changing nature of family composition but as Morrow and Richards (1996, p93) argue, this literature is 'not about children.' Indeed much of the family literature focuses on the roles of parents and guardians and as a result of this the experiences of children in families have often been overlooked. Where children have been included proxies have been used to collect 'their' data (Mahon et al., 1996) or studies have focussed on 'problem children' (Qvortrup, 1987) alone. What has emerged is a research culture that largely does not listen to the views and opinions of children (Lansdown, 1994; Flekkoy, 1991). As Qvortrup et al. (1994, p2) comment this is largely due to the negative opinion researchers have towards using children as respondents: 'Children are often denied the right to speak for themselves either because they are held incompetent in making judgements or because they are thought of as unreliable witnesses about their own lives.'

Where 'pure' family research is to be undertaken the researcher cannot assume that they know all about the families studied without first asking children about the families they live in (Mahon et al., 1996). From this I would argue that children should be included in family research within consumer behaviour and marketing. This paper reviews the various ways in which children and childhood are dealt with in earlier social science research, offers a summary of the issues of ethics and access which need to be considered when researching children; and then moves on to discuss the methods usually employed to capture the voices of children.

#### Research Issues I: Definitions - *What is a child?*

It is important at this point to ask what constitutes a child and childhood? A child is defined by the United Nations, as detailed in article 1 of the 'Convention of the Rights of the Child' act, to be 'every human being below the age of eighteen years'<sup>1</sup> whilst

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

the Market Research Society defines children as those under the age of sixteen, and young people as those aged sixteen and seventeen years old<sup>2</sup>.

Whilst the United Nations and Market Research Society have aided the description of a child they have, nonetheless, grouped different age groups and stages of child development under the sole umbrella of childhood. Within 'childhood' lie vast differences and capabilities and it should also be recognized that age alone should not be used as the sole determinant of ability or performance (Garbarino and Scott, 1992). In addition to using age as a defining criteria of childhood status, it is often found that children are also defined in terms of a comparison to adulthood. Here children are viewed as 'incomplete humans' (Jenks, 1996; Mackay, 1991; Skolnick, 1975) who 'notice less, remember less, confuse fantasy with reality and are far more suggestible than adults' (Garbarino and Scott, 1992, p13). The theory of socialisation has added to this viewpoint (Mackay, 1991) with children seen as adults in training and as such not yet finished.

The theory of socialisation states that children must follow the path towards adulthood with the ultimate goal being the achievement of adult status. Consequently children vis-à-vis adults are seen as deficient, leading to the assumption that children are in fact incomplete. Waksler (1991, p63), on the other hand, defends childhood as an equal state of being by proposing that children should not be viewed as being less competent research sources, but instead should be seen as having different competencies:

'In everyday life we adults take for granted that children as a category know less than adults, have less experience, are less serious, and are less important than adults in the ongoing work of everyday life. *I suggest that for the word less we as sociologists substitute the word different and consider the theoretical and methodological implications.* [Emphases added]'

Jenks (1996) further acknowledges the view of the incomplete child suggesting that 'the child is familiar to us and yet strange' (p3). Adults are believed to resolve the discrepancies between them and children by transforming the young child into an

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<sup>2</sup> The Market Research Society's (2005) code of conduct, detailing the age of a child and providing a discussion of conducting research with children, can be found at <http://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/downloads/code2005.pdf>

adult. The adult centred society (Punch, 2002) thus hands down the submissive role to children strengthening adult superiority. This position has led some researchers to assume that, as they were once children, they know all about childhood which is perhaps why so much data about children has originated from adult and parental proxies. However, as Punch (2002) states, indeed adults were once children but they soon forget the ways of the child, and ultimately adults researching children and childhood should abandon the assumption that they hold superior knowledge (Alderson and Goodey, 1996).

### Research Issues II: Ethics - *Child research and ethical considerations*

The boundaries of childhood are patrolled by gatekeepers (Jenks, 1996; Mason, 2004) with childhood existing under adult surveillance (Banister and Booth, 2005; Harden et al., 2000). Partly due to this research has been conducted 'on' children, rather than 'with' them, with child research often based on adult perspectives (Mayall, 2001) with Christensen and James (2001, p2) commenting that 'childhood and children's lives have solely been explored through the views and understandings of their adult caretakers'.

Youth, it seems, is surrounded with rights (Bruckner, 2000). However, it is highly pertinent that researchers attempt to gain the often unheard accounts of childhood. Hood et al. (1996, p119) suggest that 'research should not be on children but with them and for them' with the aim of child research making children heard. Article 12 of the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (cited in Morrow and Richards, 1996, p91) stipulates that: 'Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'

The muting of the child voice has been achieved by viewing children as contaminated data sources (Mandell, 1991). This restrictive view of children has been questioned, with many researchers accepting the notion that children are experts in their own lives (Clark, 2004) and as such are able to give reliable testimonies (Fielding and Conroy, 1992; Spencer and Flin, 1990). What is required to hear children is the repositioning

of children to acknowledge that they are reliable research participants with a move away from the view that children are mere passive and unreliable beings. Children are far from this, with Christensen and James (2001) proposing that children are social actors in their own right and with James and Prout (1990) sharing the view that children are actively involved in creating their own social selves. James and Prout (1990, p6) continue by commenting that children can 'no longer be regarded as simply the passive subjects of structural determinations'.

### Research Issues III: Access - *Gaining Access to children; gatekeepers and consent*

Mackay (1991) suggests that much of what we know about children and childhood originates from researchers who have children, and who base their findings on their own experiences. Although the need to speak to children directly has been raised, researchers often face the problem of accessing children. The guardian or parental gatekeeper can often restrict access, with Hek et al. (1996, p73) defining gatekeepers as those who aim to safeguard the interests of others. These gatekeepers are willing, at any point, to withdraw the right to access children (Corsaro and Molinari, 2001).

Whilst it could be argued that the overprotective nature of parents and guardians has itself restricted the voice of children, it is understandable that they may be sceptical about the interests of the adult researcher. Children are, after all, potentially vulnerable (Morrow and Richards, 1996) and, due to the perceived position of power between adult researcher and child respondent, gatekeepers are right to be aware of the possibility of abuse (Kor, 1992).

Gaining permission from the adult gatekeeper, however, should not be seen as ensuring immediate access to the child. Instead the adult gatekeeper should be seen as giving his or her permission to approach the child to ask him or her if they would like to take part in the research process (Mandell, 1991). Consent from parents and guardians can be gained by disclosing as much information as possible about the study beforehand and also by debriefing after the data has been collected on any issues that could not have been disclosed to them at the start of the project. Those participating in the research should also be given the option of having their data destroyed if they so wish (Langston et al., 2004).

Mason (2004) suggests that for valid consent to be given by a child they must understand the nature of his or her involvement (and that it differs from that of other adults who may wish to seek information from them), that the information collected is solely to aid the researcher in their understanding of a given topic better, and that no one will make decisions about the child because of what he or she has disclosed. The last point I would object to, given that in extreme cases child confidentiality can be breached in situations where abuse or neglect are apparent which would involve making a decision on the behalf of the child to act in their best interests (Mahon et al., 1996).

The safety of the child should be of paramount concern during data collection (Langston et al., 2004) and researchers are obliged to ensure that children should suffer no harm when participating in research (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Davis, 1998). Greig and Taylor (1999) further suggest that for informed consent to be given the child must be aware of what he or she needs to do to take part in the research and that they understand that they can withdraw from the research at any time. In summary, informed consent can be given only when an individual ‘voluntarily agrees to participate in a research project, based on a full disclosure of pertinent information’ (Tymchuk, 1992, p128).

### **Researcher/researched dynamics: Capturing children’s voices**

#### *How to ‘see’ (and hear) children*

Once access has been granted by the parent or guardian, and the child, the researcher faces a separate problem: it may be that the child sees the adult researcher as invading his or her space (Punch, 2002). This seems to be the central problem of child research, determining the membership role the adult researcher should take when interacting with children (Adler and Adler, 1987). The various ways in which children are viewed impacts on the way researchers study children. Mandell (1991), for instance, identifies three roles researchers can take when studying children; *detached observer, complete involvement* and *semi-participatory*.



The first role, of a *detached observer*, states that the worlds of adults and children are so different (Damon, 1977) that adult researchers can only ever research children from an objective stance. The detached observer role sees children as being 'socially incompetent, intellectually immature, and culturally ignorant' (Mandell, 1991, p39). The detached observer role is consistent with those who view children as being incomplete.

The second role of the adult researcher Mandell (1991) proposes is that of *complete involvement*. This role, often called the *least adult role*, involves the suspension of all adult characteristics except physical size which requires 'blending in to the social world of children, not siding with adults, operating physically and metaphorically on the children's level in their social worlds' (Mayall, 2001, p121). Here the differences between adults and children are said to be 'more ideological than previously acknowledged' (Mandell, 1991, p40) and differences between adult and child (except size) are thought to be easily minimised.

Much criticism can be directed towards the complete involvement role. Thorne (1993), through her experiences of adopting the role in a classroom setting, found sustaining the role very hard over long time frames and that the children themselves questioned her technique and social repositioning. Children can also face significant difficulty in accepting an adult as 'one of them' because they have limited experience of an adult as being non-judgemental or enjoyable (Mandell, 1991) and they are used to having their lives controlled and patrolled by adults (Punch, 2002).

The second criticism directed at the least adult role rests on Mandell's (1991) experience of using this technique. Whilst adopting the least adult role, involving non-interference in the child world, she witnessed a young boy hurt another despite being warned by another adult (the teacher whom had granted Mandell access to her classroom) to intervene: 'I became so immersed in my non-interfering least adult role that I calmly watched one boy cut open another boy's head with a shovel, ignoring an observing teacher's warnings to intervene and avert the blow' (Mandell, 1991, p50). Given the position of power that adults researching children have, and their duty to protect the wellbeing of those involved in their research, the least adult role has the

potential to be unethical having as it does the potential for harm to be caused to child participants.

The final role Mandell (1991) puts forward is the *semi-participatory role*. Adult researchers who adopt this role focus on the similarities between adult and child, recognising that adults are 'unable to pass unnoticed in the society of children' (Fine, 1987, p222). Corsaro (1985) acknowledges that the physical size of an adult can prevent their full participation in the world of the child, coupled with the child's potential scepticism directed towards those adopting this role, and so a completely involved / least adult role is not possible. The semi participatory role offers a solution to child research due to the ethical criticisms directed towards the complete involvement role and the restrictive nature of the detached observer role.

James (1995), similarly to Mandell (1991), attempts to identify the ways researchers see children to help explain how they are studied. James (1995, p4) identifies four 'types of the child': the *developing child*, the *tribal child* and *adult child*, and the *social child*. The *developing child* is seen as incompetent and incomplete, and if children's voices are gained they are unlikely to be taken seriously (Morrow and Richards, 1996). The *tribal child*, on the other hand, is viewed as competent, but this view proposes that children inhabit a separate world from adults. Here children are seen as 'the other' and are essentially unknowable in some way (O'Kane, 2001) with both views conceptualising children as lacking the status adults have.

In contrast to the *developing child* and *tribal child* the *adult* and *social child* is given the same status as adults, but are viewed in different ways. Whilst the *adult child* is considered to be 'essentially the same' (Morrow and Richards, 1996, p99) to adults, and is seen as socially competent (Alderson, 1993), the *social child* is viewed as possessing different competencies to adults. It is important to stress, however, that these competencies are not necessarily inferior to those of adults (James et al., 1998).

Punch (2002, p322) also comments that 'the way in which a researcher perceives the status of children influences the choice of methods' to utilise in child research. Punch (2002) suggests that there are three main ways of viewing children; the first states that children are indistinguishable from adults and are essentially the same, the second

proposes that children are utterly different from adults, and the third view suggests (similarly to that of the social child advocated by James (1995) and Mandell's (1991) role of researcher as semi participator) that children can be perceived as similar to adults, but have different competencies. It appears that children should be seen as social beings in their own right, but that they have different competencies from adults (and from other children as well).

### *Child Competencies*

Whilst the definition of a child proposed by the United Nations and the Market Research Society groups children as all individuals under the ages of eighteen and sixteen years respectively, it is important to acknowledge that significant differences exist within the child group. Whilst Ekström et al. (1987) propose that children under eleven years old should not be included as research participants due to their lack of cognitive development, and Moschis and Moore (1979) propose that older children should only be included in consumer research as their competencies are proposed to be at an 'acceptable level', others argue that age should not be seen as the key determinant of competence (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Christensen and James, 2001b). The abilities of children rarely fit into neat pigeon holes (Garbarino and Stott, 1992) and as such age specific methods have been called into question: 'How often do researchers choose an age group simply because they feel that the children will be 'old enough' to engage effectively with the researcher's project?' (James et al., 1998, p174). It should be highlighted that children have different competencies, and that these competencies are not necessarily inferior to those of adults (Waksler, 1991).

Boyden and Ennew (1997), however, suggest that there are differences between children and adults. They suggest that children may have a more restricted use of vocabulary, may not fully understand some words, have less experience of the world and have shorter attention spans. Whilst this may be the case it should be stressed that research is a reciprocal relationship and that the more competent the adult researcher the less competence is required from the child (Garbarino and Stott, 1992).

Mayall (1994, p11) defends the competence of children in providing reliable information, and comments:

‘Discussions about data collection with, and from and for children tend to focus on the following perceived problems: children can’t tell truth from fiction; children make things up to please the interviewer; children do not have enough experience of knowledge to comment on their experience, or indeed to report it usefully; children’s accounts are themselves socially constructed, and what they say in conversation or tell you if you ask them is what they have been told by adults.’

Mayall (1994) goes on to highlight, however, that all these concerns directed towards research with children are equally true of research with adults. As Kellet and Ding (2004, p165) similarly state ‘adults are just as likely to blur truth and fiction as children’ and that ‘children can and do provide reliable responses if questioned in a manner they can understand’. So whilst indeed the competencies of children differ from those of adults, child competencies are in no way inferior to their adult counterparts and children have the capacity to provide reliable information.

### *Methods in Child research*

As it is suggested that children are not a homogenous mass (Fraser, 2004) Banister and Booth (2005) rightly propose that an array of research techniques are needed to gain their opinions and experiences. Whilst Banister and Booth (2005) adopt the term ‘child centric’ in their research approach (using a combination of projective techniques involving drawing and writing, interviews and discussions of photographs the children had taken, in a quasi ethnographic manner) Christensen and James (2001, p2) propose that:

‘To carry out research with children does not necessarily entail adopting different or particular methods ... like adults, children can and do participate in structured and unstructured interviews; they fill in questionnaires; and, on their own terms, they allow the participant observer to join with them in their daily lives. Thus, although some research techniques might sometimes be thought to be more appropriate for use with children, with regard to particular research contexts or the framing of particular research questions, there is, we would argue, nothing particular or indeed peculiar to children that makes the use of any technique imperative.’

Whilst it is accepted that a variety of methods are needed whilst conducting research with children (Punch, 2002), partly due to the need to keep their interest and attention (Boyden and Ennew (1997), it should be stressed that methods branded ‘child friendly’ (such as drawing) are not necessarily appropriate. Instead what is necessary is the use of accessible language and instruction, again recognising that the more competent the adult researcher the less competence is required from the child (Garbarino and Stott, 1992). For instance, although drawing is favoured by some researchers (see for example James, 1995) to be an appropriate method in child research, with Punch (2002, p331) commenting: ‘the advantage of using drawing with children is that it can be creative, fun and encourage children to be more actively involved in the research’, some (for instance Cavin, 1991) have questioned its universal application.

Whilst indeed drawing and artwork is a common method in the daily lives of children, particularly at school, it is for this very reason why its application has been questioned. Cavin (1991) highlights the fact that children may see producing artwork as a task (as in the classroom) and Punch (2002) acknowledges that some children may be inhibited by a lack of talent, particularly older children. Further criticism has been directed to using drawing as an appropriate method in child research. Some children have found giving an explanation of their drawing(s) insulting (Punch, 2002) and it has also been shown that if an interpretation from the child is not sought adult researchers have the potential to read meanings into the artwork which may not be there (Harden et al., 2000).

A more favoured approach is to blend ‘adult’ methods with those thought of as ‘child friendly’ (Punch, 2002) so as not to patronise child respondents, whilst also recognising that they have similar competencies. For instance, Punch (2002) found that diary entries (which were initially thought inappropriate in application to children) were favoured by child respondents, further emphasising that ‘child specific’ methods may be myopic.

### *Research Setting*

Child research studies are usually centred on sites in which children are abundant, for instance playgrounds (Opie and Opie, 1969) and more often schools (Banister and Booth, 2005; Mandell, 1991; O’Kane, 2001; Cavin, 1991; Coates, 2004). Due to this the family as a site is often ignored (Harden et al., 2000). The site in which information is gathered from children is of paramount concern, with Garbarino and Stott (1992) claiming that the more familiar the site the more valid the information obtained. Adult spaces dominate (Punch, 2002), which is particularly true of classroom studies.

Kellet and Ding (2004, p170) discuss the classroom as a data collection site and comment: ‘the most common location for such [child] research is the primary school, where there are inherent dangers that participation could verge on coercion if children interpret it as schoolwork’. Given the need to explore the experiences of children in families the family home is the obvious site. However, collecting data in the home also presents some problems. Hood et al. (1996) recognise that access to homes can be difficult, especially for researchers who are strangers, as the public / private boundary has to be crossed. Mayall’s (2001, p127) experience of being a guest in the family home had ramifications on access issues:

‘But as a guest in the family home, the researcher’s social position does not have clearly established parameters; it has to be negotiated. There is a triangle of conventions and negotiations. As an adult, and a guest, the researcher may feel obliged to accept what conditions are offered by the adult, the parent. But as a guest of the child too, the researcher must take account of what the child sees as appropriate’.

So whilst researching children in their home overcomes the issue of respondents perceiving the data collection process as work (as in a classroom setting) boundaries have to be overcome. Conducting research with children in the home also rests on the favourable notion of collecting data within a familiar environment, and also accepts the need to involve, and collect data from, adults who co-exist alongside children. However it is equally true that once access has been granted by parents / guardians, and children, the parental gatekeeper in the home may wish to be present when researchers collect data from their children (Brannen, 1994).

Once access has been granted, either to the family home or usually the school setting, the manner in which research with children is conducted also needs considerable thought. One to one interviews conducted with children can further emphasise the superiority and authority of adult researchers. Instead group interviews are favoured (Mahon et al., 1996), or those conducted with child pairs (Mayall, 2001), in which children have been found to say what they truly feel and not merely to present what the child thinks the researcher wants to hear as has been the case in one on one interviews (Harden et al., 2000). Children are also reported to find one on one interviews intimidating (Hood et al., 1996b).

Following the semi-participant (Mandell, 1991) and social child (James, 1995) theory, a conversational approach to interviews is also believed to be favoured by children (Mayall, 2001) with the researcher aiming to position himself as a friend (Fine, 1987; Harden et al., 2000). Although the possibility of a researcher becoming a friend with a respondent has been criticised, for instance Jamieson (1998) proposes that friendships can only ever be formed by individuals equal in status, the development of a long term relationship between researcher and respondent can help build trust and rapport. Mandell (1991) suggests that such a relationship is crucial in unearthing hidden information. Such exposure to respondents, child and adult alike, would favour an ethnographic or quasi ethnographic approach with Jenks (2001, p71) recognising that ethnography 'is a most effective methodology to be employed in the study of childhood'.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that attitudes towards children and childhood shape the approaches taken to conducting research with children (Adler and Adler, 1987; Mandell, 1991; Punch, 2002; Thorne, 1993). Whilst past studies have been conducted 'on' children, using parental proxies to account for the experiences of children (Mayall, 2001), research should now be conducted with and for children with the aim of getting their voices heard (Christensen and James, 2001). The family as a research site has often been overlooked with the vast majority of child research conducted in classrooms (O'Kane, 2001; Cavin, 1991; Coates, 2004) which are adult dominated.

Whilst children can largely be seen in three ways (as being the same as adults, totally different from adults or as sharing some adult similarities but having different competencies) Mandell's (1991) semi-participatory and James's (1995) social child theory are now favoured by researchers, recognising as they do that the capabilities of children are not necessarily inferior to adults – just different. The differing child and adult competencies do not necessarily dictate child specific and appropriate methods; it is seen that providing the adult researcher is competent in employing a given method (Garbarino and Stott, 1992), and frames this method in an understandable way to the children involved, then the child respondents can equally fill in questionnaires, take part in interviews, fill in diary entries, and so on (Christensen and James, 2001). Contrary to this the methods thought to be appropriate to children, for instance drawing, have been criticised as not being received well by children who may feel the task is too school like (Cavin, 1991). It is proposed that a blend of methods thought to be best suited to children alongside traditional 'adult' methods should be used.

What is clear, however, is that the voices of children have been unheard (Lansdown, 1994). Through building trust and rapport with children reliable accounts can be achieved (Clark, 2004; Fielding and Conroy, 1992; Spencer and Flin, 1990). Whilst it is thought that children are contaminated data sources (Morrow, 1999) they are the experts in their own lives (Langsted, 1994), and as such should be listened to. Listening to children requires time and trust to be built up.



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