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Knowledgeshare

Reviews

Research involving children: recent developments and current trends in thinking

Toolkits: a Practical Guide to Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Impact Assessment

Louisa Gosling and Mike Edwards

Save the Children: London. ISBN 13-978-1-84187-064-9, 2006, 341 pp.

Doing Research with Children. 2nd edition.

Anne Greig, Jayne Taylor and Tommy MacKay

Sage Publications: London. ISBN 978-1-4129-1845-9, 2007, 216 pp.

Researching Young People's Lives

Sue Heath, Rachel Brooks, Elizabeth Cleaver and Eleanor Ireland

Sage Publications: London. ISBN 978-1-4129-1056-9, 2009, 224 pp.

Researching with Children and Young People: Research Design, Methods and Analysis

Kay Tisdall, John Davis and Michael Gallagher

Sage Publications: London. ISBN 978-1-4129-2389-7, 2009, 248 pp.

Children today hold an important place in society and are valued for what they offer. They represent society's hopes for the future. Children in the western world have rights today, but historically this has not always been the case. In the UK, children are protected by the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004, and by various other

charters, guidelines and government policies concerning their health and welfare. Internationally, organisations such as UNICEF and Save the Children were set up to confer protection and oversee support to children as the most vulnerable group of a population in war or disaster zones (Greig *et al*, 2007). However, this happy state of affairs (the positive view) with regard to children is by no means universal. We need to be mindful that many children, both in the UK and further afield, still suffer the debilitating effects of poverty, hardship and hunger, they lack basic amenities such as water, sanitation and healthcare, or access to a basic education, and many are subject to violence, abuse and neglect.

The study of children and their lives leads to a growing body of sociological, psychological and developmental research. There is currently much debate about research methodologies, whether quantitative or qualitative, and research which includes children and young people is no exception: its methods are evolving. The emphasis today, when working with children, has shifted towards an approach that aims to engage with children and their families using a holistic approach. In contrast, as Anne Greig and her colleagues observe, previous research was 'done *on* children rather than *with* children' (Greig *et al*, 2007, p. 89). Greig and colleagues cite researchers, such as the developmental psychologist Judy Dunn, who realised how important it was to study children in their natural setting, rather than using a laboratory setting, in order to obtain meaningful results.

The many challenges involved in examining children's lives and their views and experiences are reflected in several new texts on the subject which have been published recently. I have selected four books to share here with colleagues. *Researching Young People's Lives*, by Heath, Brooks, Cleaver and Ireland (2009), *Researching with Children and Young People*, by Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher (2009), and a second, revised edition of *Doing Research with Children*, by Greig, Taylor and MacKay (2007, first published in 1999) are all published by Sage. I have also included the Save the Children publication *Toolkits: a Practical Guide to Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Impact Assessment*, by Gosling and Edwards (2006).

Researchers today are urged to engage closely with children's and young people's families when conducting research involving children, and an approach based upon participation is encouraged, rather than viewing children as 'subjects' in a research project. Some (participatory) research engages child participants

as collaborators (Hill *et al*, 2004; Laws *et al*, 2008). Clearly, the ethical implications of researching with children and the attendant risk of abuse of trust or worse require careful consideration (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998).

While the three Sage texts cover the main areas involved in researching with children, each takes a different approach to the subject matter, reflecting the individual authors’ interests and professional backgrounds. The focus of Anne Greig and colleagues is firmly grounded in the scientific discipline of psychology, from both the theoretical and practitioner perspectives. The approach of Sue Heath and colleagues in researching young people’s lives is informed by social sciences and social policy. The text by Kay Tisdall and colleagues, although also informed by social policy, includes plenty of useful examples of case studies from research in schools, and thus has much to offer researchers who are interested in educational perspectives on children’s lives.

In addition, readers may be interested in another useful book, *Toolkits: a Practical Guide to Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Impact Assessment* (2006). First published in 1995, revised in 2003, and reprinted in 2006, this workbook is produced by Save the Children. The authors, Louisa Gosling and Mike Edwards, provide the researcher with practical tools which can be useful when adopting those participatory approaches that are now recommended when researching with children

The content of the text by Greig and colleagues is probably the most familiar to psychologists, providing as it does a good overview of some of the classic developmental psychology studies (e.g. the Sally Anne experiment), with good illustrations. However, it is disappointing (and frankly a little embarrassing) to find that the illustrations all involve white children and even white dolls. Apart from this, the authors, all of whom are professionally active practitioners in childcare services, have produced an excellent and informative text. There are plenty of useful examples and sample practical ideas for research. The layout is clear, and the authors highlight the need to link research to theory. The book includes an excellent introduction to statistics, in which the authors emphasise the importance of considering data analysis *before* designing a questionnaire or survey. Ethical issues are also covered. However, given that the authors themselves emphasise the importance of ethical implications when researching with children, it might have been helpful if the chapter on ethics had been positioned earlier in the text, rather than towards the end of the book (in Chapter 9).

By contrast, Tisdall and colleagues discuss ethics earlier in their text (in Chapter 2), followed by a good case study discussion on children’s rights, thus nicely setting the scene for their discussion on research

involving children. This book covers research on childhood through to young adulthood with further excellent examples of case studies, including working with disabled children, youth work, involving children in research projects, and ideas for supporting them as researchers. Again, plenty of examples of questionnaires and related research resources are provided to help to inspire the researcher. Data collection and analysis are covered, although with very little detail about statistical design or analysis by comparison with the text by Greig and colleagues. Tisdall and her colleagues, by contrast, do give much more consideration to qualitative research approaches, reflecting the authors’ backgrounds and individual preferences, and they also provide helpful tips and ‘toolkit’ ideas, including resources from 11 different research projects, from both practitioner and academic perspectives.

Although Tisdall and colleagues provide only brief coverage of statistical analysis (a few statistics are mentioned, such as *t*-tests), the links between ontology, epistemology and methodology are discussed adequately, and the reader is encouraged to reflect critically on the relationship of research ideas and the importance of a clear, well-defined study design. The authors do, however, provide a good introductory discussion on the association of sociology and critical psychology, and they offer pragmatic tips and advice on linking social research with more ‘scientific’ approaches. It is a text more firmly positioned in the creative research methods stable, with the authors highlighting the importance of games when conducting research with children. Research is thus viewed as a process of ‘having fun’ (Hill, 1997; Thomas and O’Kane, 1998).

As with the text by Greig and colleagues, the book by Tisdall and colleagues emphasises children’s views and their experiences as fundamental to research and its outputs, since children themselves can be encouraged to give their account, rather than their voices being mediated and modified by ‘powerful’ adults.

Moving on to research with young people, the book by Sue Heath and colleagues considers youth-orientated research and the repertoire of methods that can be used when conducting research with young adults. This book continues where the Tisdall text ends, thus offering a seamless transition from research involving older children to research with young people. Ethical practice is well covered. Research across difference, ethnicity and sexuality is also highlighted in this text, with a chapter dedicated to these topics. Like the authors of the other texts discussed here, Heath and colleagues encourage researchers to involve participants in the research process. Qualitative interviewing, ethnographic and visual research methods are all thoughtfully discussed, followed by chapters on survey techniques and advice on using secondary data and official statistics. However, again there is only a very limited coverage of quantitative methods and the use of

statistics. The authors conclude by considering the use of the Internet and listing some web-based resources. Information on some of the main ethical guideline links is also provided in an appendix.

Finally, I turn to the text by Gosling and Edwards, published by Save the Children. Firmly adopting a real-world approach to research (Robson, 2002), this text has much to recommend it. It takes the reader through all stages of research development, planning, evaluation, impact assessment and dissemination. Although not specifically claiming to be a text for research with children, it has much to offer as it covers participatory approaches, considers how to include children's views and insights, and discusses how research can ensure that different groups, such as children, women, people with disabilities and different ethnic groups, can be included and involved in research programmes. As with the text by Tisdall and colleagues, the Save the Children book is set out as a user's toolkit and aims to guide the research team through the process from the beginning of a project to its final stages.

The advantages and disadvantages of different research approaches and methods are well set out, with a useful range of tables and flow charts to help the researcher to decide how to optimise the exploration of complex situations. Since this book draws on Save the Children's experience, it is especially useful for researchers who need to monitor and evaluate research programmes and interventions in emergency situations. The text draws on a wealth of practical experience. Frameworks and flow charts are provided to guide the researcher in analysing and assessing complex research situations. However, although the authors include some suggestions for further reading and a short glossary section, there is no index, which makes it difficult to navigate the text. A toolkit or practical guide is, by its very nature, something that the reader needs to be able to take from the shelf and refer to, so this is disappointing.

In summary, each of these books provides sound advice on conducting research with children, and has much to offer both the novice and the more experienced researcher. All four texts make the assumption that children's 'voices' provide the best source of knowledge about their lives. If I was asked to select just one book, I would recommend Greig, Taylor and MacKay's text for researchers with little or no background in developmental psychology, since it is important to consider the age and developmental stage of children when designing research involving them. This text offers the most information here. For those researchers who already have a background in developmental psychology, the book by Tisdall and colleagues would be a sound choice, while the text by Heath and colleagues would be a good choice for those conducting research with young people. A close second

to any of these would have to be the Save the Children *Toolkits*, with its more international approach. This has much to offer, despite the minor setback of the lack of an index. It is a difficult decision, since all four books are of high quality, informative, and contain much practical advice. All are written in an engaging and readable style. Enjoy!

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Marginalized Reproduction: Ethnicity, Infertility and Reproductive Technologies

Lorraine Culley, Nicky Hudson and Floor van Rooij (eds)

Earthscan Books: London. ISBN 978-84407-576-8, 2009, 224 pp.

This book is a collection of thought-provoking, highly illuminating chapters that provide a wonderful insight into several key areas that encompass infertility, reproduction, ethnicity and culture. The book draws upon an array of quality research from several developed countries. The inclusion of direct quotes from participants of ethnic-minority groups taken during focus groups and interviews adds much value and further engages the reader. This, together with the approach taken by the multi-disciplinary team of contributors, has resulted in a piece of literature which should appeal both to those with expertise and a knowledge base within the above fields and to those who merely have a lay interest in such important key areas.

The book delivers in two parts. Part One (Researching Infertility, Ethnicity and Culture) examines the