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Rethinking empirical research into Children in Care and contact

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Jenny Simpson, The Open University

Contact: definition and legal framework

- as “...a dynamic, transactional process and all parties can influence and be influenced by the contact arrangements” (Neill, 2008 p.6)
- “can involve conflicts of interest between parties and often raises ethical dilemmas about privacy, confidentiality, autonomy....deception and truth telling” (Neill, 2008 p.8)
- “remains a mixture of art and science, possibly more balanced towards art” (Triseliotis, 2010 p.59)
- local authority’s duty to “endeavour to promote contact between a looked after child and his/her parents or others” unless it is not practicable to do so or not consistent with the child’s welfare (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations: Volume 2 – Care Planning, Placement and Case Review, 2010 p.2).
- Section 22 (4) of the Children Act 1989 which in essence states that before a local authority makes a decision in respect to a child it is proposing to place in care, the wishes and feelings of that same child, as far as practicably possible, should be discovered

Children in Care – who are they?



- Children who are living in out-of-home placements
- 69,540 children (as at 31 March 2015)
- 61% enter the care of a local authority as a result of abuse or neglect
- 60% of children are the subject of a Care Order
- 19,850 are looked after as a result of a voluntary agreement (Department of Education Statistical First Release, September 2015)



Children in Care – who are they?



The majority of children looked after at 31 March 2015 (73%) are from a White British background: similar to the general population of all children.

Children of mixed ethnicity continue to be slightly over-represented, and children of Asian ethnicity slightly underrepresented in the looked after children population

(Department of Education Statistical First Release, September 2015)



Contact – what is it?

- Face-to-face meetings
 - Letters
 - Telephone calls
 - Email
 - Supervised
 - Unsupervised
- Children's Centres
 - Home of foster carers
 - Residential Units
 - Local authority offices
- Foster Carers
 - Social work practitioners



Theoretical concepts that have informed contact

- Mother-child bond (Clarke and Clarke, 1976 p.23)
- Genealogical bewilderment (Sants, 1964)
- Attachment (Bolwby, 1968 and Howe, 1995)
- Socio-genealogical connectedness (Owusu-Bempah and Howitt, 1997)



Family a socially constructed notion

- Our comprehension of family is not only built on personal experience (Gillis, et al. 2001 as cited in McCarthy), it is also formed through wider societal expectations of family that are communicated via the mediums of television, books and news headlines (Gillis, 1996).
- *“Thus the more we do in Western culture on family memories and tracing lines of heritage, the more we contribute to the increasingly iconic status of families in our culture imaginary”* (Smart, 2007 p.39).
- Thus the ideology associated with the family promotes a particular way of domestic living which is boundaried and defined, thereby inadvertently dismissing other possible alternatives of relational networks, and reinforcing itself as the norm.
- Mason and Tipper (2006)

Empirical Studies on Contact

Enabling a child to form a new attachment to his/her carers

McAuley, 1996 ; Biehal, 2009 and Children's Rights Director, 2012

Assess the relationship between the child and birth parent(s)

Cleaver, 2000 and Triseliotis, 2011

Providing a child with a sense of his/her family history, as well as self-identity

Triseliotis, 1983 and 2000; Lynnes and Goddard, 1996; Feast 2009, Adams, 2012;

Triseliotis, 1983; Rushton, 1989 Macaskill; 2002; James et al, 2008; Children's Rights Director, 2009 and 2012

Allowing a child to heal from negative feelings associated with the birth family

Maintain relationships with siblings and other birth relatives

Macaskill, 2002; Sinclair et al. 2005; Schofield and Beek (2005); Biehal, 2007 and Adams, 2012

Aid reunification with the birth family

Delfrabro, 2002; Sinclair, 2005 Biehal, 2007; Farmer et al. 2011 and Wade et al., 2011

Research Methodologies

Qualitative – Millham et al., 1986

- *“It is clear that participants in social interaction will play their roles in the light of previous experience, they will interpret situations, choose actions and negotiate with others to achieve their own ends. Prediction, one of the main techniques of validation in the scientific method, is therefore, made more difficult in the social sciences as individuals can choose between a range of strategies”. (Millham et al., 1986)*
- *“But unquestioned faith in measurement and survey techniques avoids the deeper question of the values that are implicit in the questions asked, the data gathered and the methods of analysis (Millham et al., 1986)*

Research Methodologies



Quantitative – Quinton et al., (1997)

Quinton et al. (1997) stated that there were major flaws in the range of studies on contact that included:

- sample size,
- representativeness,
- the unit of analysis (placement type rather than the individual child) thereby making all the studies susceptible to 'biases of an unknown kind and severity.
- not taking account of the child in care's prior psychological functioning
- making use of a measurements of contact.

Quinton et al. (1997) reasoned that without these components being taken into account as part of the methodological approach it would mean that the content and quality of contact could not be systematically recorded and subsequently analysed (p.395-396).

Contact in the digital age

The emergence of the mobile phone, smartphone and social networking platforms such as Facebook; and WhatsApp have led to what Langmia (2015) has labelled “*an irreversible communication paradigm shift*” (p.271) that has broken down the traditional barriers to contact such as distance, time, access to communication devices such as a landline telephone, finance and adult gatekeepers.

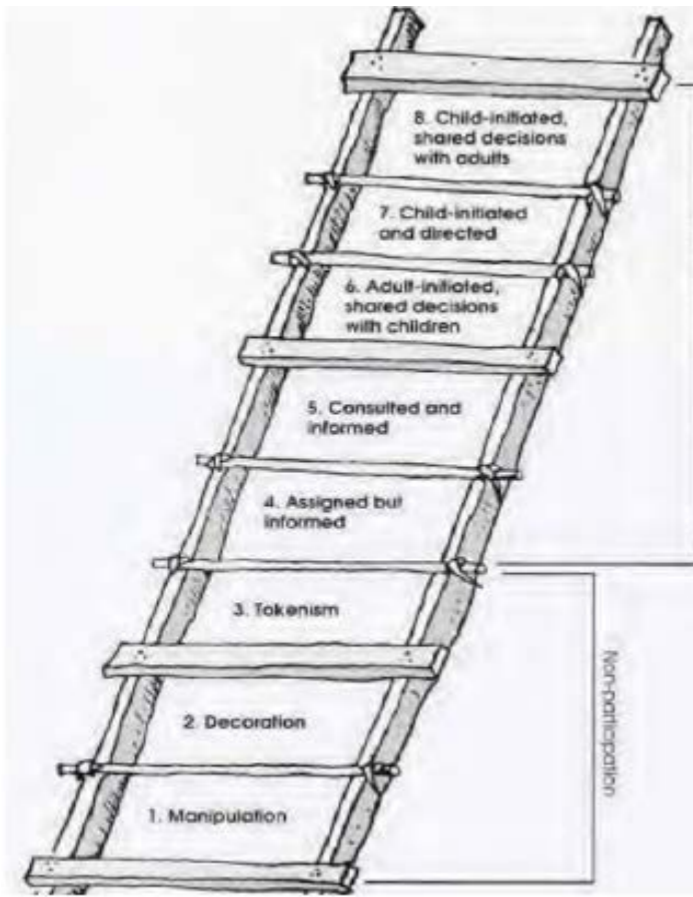


The need for a methodological shift

- Time for research about contact to make a ‘methodological shift’ by adopting a greater depth and breadth of participatory methods that see researchers engage in research for and with children and young people (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008 and McSherry et al., 2013).
- To achieve such a ‘methodological shift’ (McSherry et al., 2013) is likely to require a more explicit ontological and epistemological link to children and young people not only as social agents who are complex actors in, and interpreters of, a complex world (James and Prout, 1996 p.49),

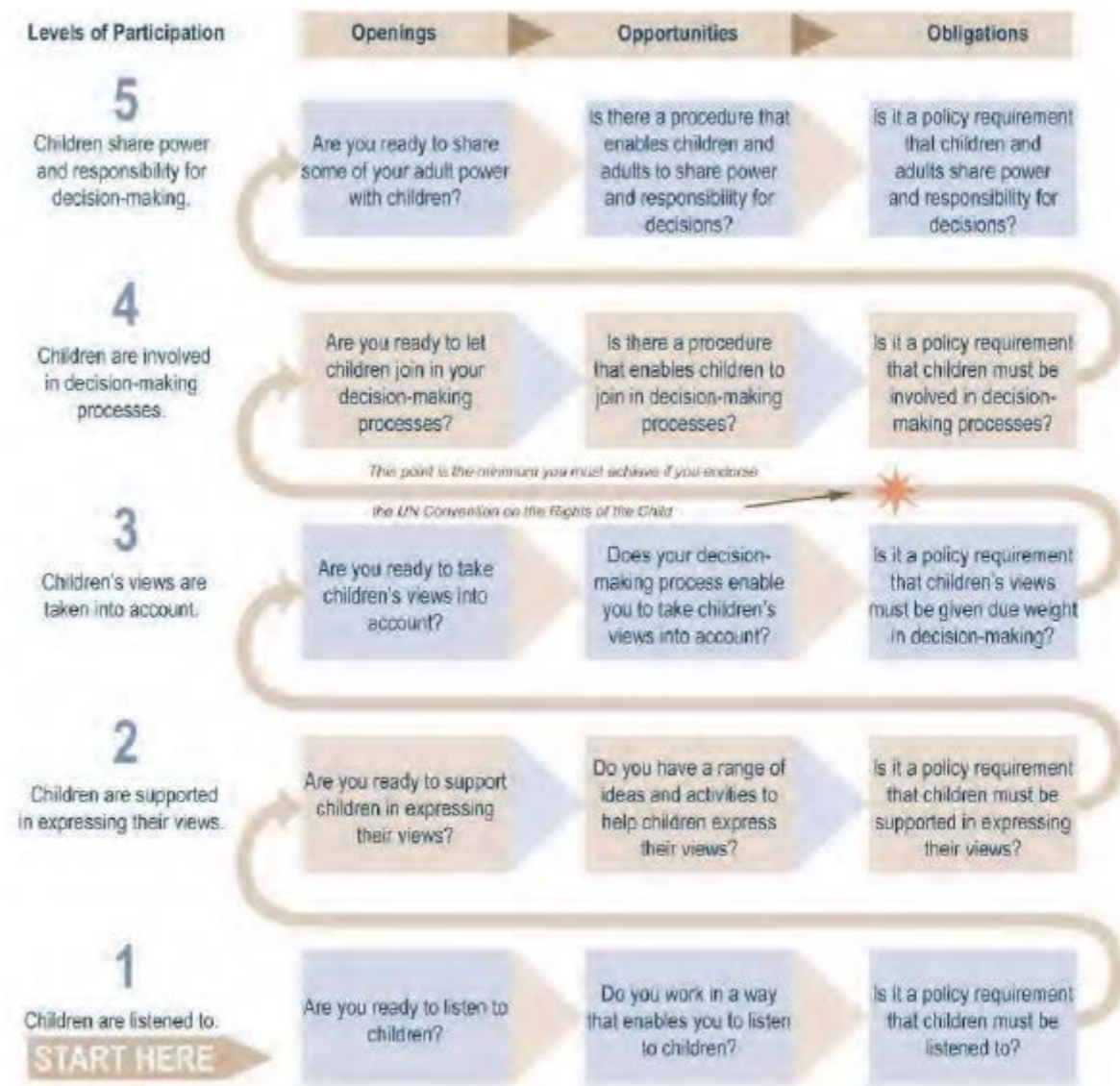


The need for a methodological shift



Harts Ladder of Participation (1997)

Shier's Pathways of Participation (2001)



Harry Shier (2001): Pathways to participation: openings, opportunities and obligations. In: Children and Society Vol 15.

The need for a methodological shift



Jans and De Backer's
Triangle of Youth
Participation (2002)

Triadic Interviews



Triadic Interview



The doctor should arrange chairs to facilitate communication with the patient.

The doctor should face the patient and speak directly to him or her.



The interpreter should be considered a member of the health care team but remain as unobtrusive as possible.

Closing remarks

children have “*multiple identities and subjectivities, each both an effect and a cause of the environments within which they engage*” (James and Prout, 1996 p.48).

children [are] complex actors in, and interpreters of, a complex world” (James and Prout, 1996 p.49).



Questions ?

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