Research with children challenges – the specificity of ethnographic work. Interpretation and alterity issues

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"Don't make up what you can find""

(Becker, 1996:59)

Research with children has been widely debated over the past 20 years, particularly since the growing of studies in the *Sociology of Childhood* [1] subject area. The production of a theoretical framework capable of studying children and children's views on their worlds was a major concern at its beginnings. The perception that children had been "left out" of the production of their own "histories" led researchers from different subject areas – sociology, anthropology, psychology, history – to rethink the way children were included or excluded from the possibility of making their own opinions and perspectives in matters related to them. A new direction in what was called as the new Childhood Studies (Prout, 2005) was thus designed. Another important development, even when we considerer its implications to research agendas with children, was the promulgation of the Children's Rights Convention (UN, 1989). Children are now seen as subjects of rights where participation ones are considered central to childhood researchers. It implies, for instance, that children's opinions should be listened and taken into account in matters affecting them, directly or indirectly; the right to express themselves according to their abilities and capacities and throughout different languages. For researchers, thus, new research dilemmas and ethical concerns when planning research with children are placed.

The premises brought be the sociology of childhood into research place adult's different challenges, namely when designing research plans and conceiving research instruments and methodologies. When considering the child as a competent social actor, capable of understanding, describing and analysing their own action at a theoretical plan, researchers must find the right ways of hearing children's voices, throughout their own languages and ways of understanding the world. Also, when seeing them as (re) constructors of their own forms of culture – childhood cultures – researchers are implicitly driven to observe children in context and understanding their interactions in an interpretative and critical perspective.

As in any research, different ethical issues and constraints emerge when researching with children. In present work, as in others, micro studies and inductive perspectives are placed for studying children's political competences in their action contexts by mobilising different research instruments that are capable of capturing children's perspectives and practices in diverse contexts – the school, after school activities and the city.

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[1] The Sociology of Childhood has been formally recognised as a specific research and subject area in the International Sociological Association (ISA), with the creation of the 53rd Research Committee, by great impulse of Prof. Jans Qvortrup, in 1998.

"(...) assumptions about the genesis of everything from friendship to scientific knowledge are carefully examined as social constructions rather than simply accepted as biological givens or obvious social facts" (Corsaro, 1997: 8)

"To describe childhood, or indeed any phenomenon, as socially constructed is to suspend a belief in or a willing reception of the taken-for-granted meanings." (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998:27)

More than dominating methodologies and techniques, children's researchers must change their views over research with them. To argue this, is not to diminish the importance of technical and methodological issues in any research, but conducting research with children demands a clear paradigmatic change regarding children's abilities and possibilities of agency as well as it's constraints. From the adult researcher it implies flexibility and attention, ability of displacement regarding his/hers ways of thinking and acting and, above all, the capacity of relating with children so they can be seen as true citizens of research[2].

A paradox arises when studying the child: although seeing them as autonomous, capable of (re) producing their worlds through their own experiences, they are always dependent of adults who, most of the times, decide *for them* and not *with them*. Therefore, several concerns emerge when it comes to involve children in research: to obtain *informed consent* – the child must understand the research proposed to her and decide whether she wants to participate and when – and *participation* – the child must be able to define, alongside with the researcher, practical issues regarding the research. So, the adult researcher has to find ways of explaining the research purposes, the questions and the steps required for it as well as what he/she expects from the child.

In the same sense, parents must allow the child's participation being also informed.

Following James, Jenks e Prout (1998: 169-191) problems, theories and methods in social sciences are connected and can't easily be separated. Research constitutes itself as a meticulous task, dependent on negotiation, adjustment, personal choices and rigorous preparation.

What are the implications of this new research with children paradigm?

No research is conducted without a theoretical framework. This framework allows the researcher concepts definitions and perspectives about the research subjects where data collection must be coherent with theoretical issues. So if we argue that children must be heard about aspects of their lives, the researcher has to find valid and adequate ways of questioning them and collect their opinions.

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[2] Lately it has been stated by several authors the need to consider children as participants of the research more than merely subjects. However, in our work it would imply that the levels of effective participation of children had been achieved as well as participatory methodologies of research with children had been applied, as stated, for instance by O'Kane (2000). For further reading on this issues we suggest O'Kane (2000), Christensen&James (2000), Woodhead &Faulkner (2000) and Alderson (2000)

The qualitative perspective of children's studies has been widely debated since the late 80's, concerned about the authorial character of these researches as well as the personal features of this kind of studies. In this sense authors argue towards the need to take account of generational issues and different representations as well as specific contexts when studying children. Thus and following the theoretical premises of the sociology of childhood frameworks of analysis authors point out two main questions to pose when performing research with children: how is childhood constituted in society and how must the child be understood? (Jenks, 2000; James, Jenks&Prout, 1998).

The ethnographic approach is, we understand, a personal choice taking account of available time for research and, of course, its objectives. By allowing the researcher's emersion into the field, the participation in children's common and daily activities and the given possibility of registering significant interaction moments among children, the ethnographic approach appeared as the most adequate to research purposes.

We do not state that ethnography is better than other methods available for research. But the possibility to cross different information sources, to develop trust relations with them and the real possibility of understanding the world through their own eyes seemes impossible to lose.

The debate about the pertinence of micro or macro oriented studies of children's worlds has been in the centre of the concerns in children's studies. Is ethnography the most adequate method to recapture children's voices? What other methods can be used in order to obtain a bigger picture of the phenomenon?

No method is better than the other. However, we argue that the study of some features of children's lives is not possible with more "traditional" methods as the quantitative ones, for instance. That is not to state that children are not capable of responding to them in an effective way. As Scott stated, when properly adequate, survey methods – even in issues where only adults are traditionally heard – are possible of being used with children, particularly with older children (2000:98-119). Although there are patronized instruments to measure friendship among children this was not a purpose of this work. More than measuring we were interested in documenting the ways they are built upon and (re) define themselves, the criteria selected to their constitution and, mostly, its influences in peer groups and interactions.

In the search of knowledge about children it's necessary to recognize that they don't exist in a vacuum their lives being, naturally, complex. And the reason for this to happen is apparently simple if we think about the repertoire of abilities and behaviors that children learn in order to live in modern societies, as adults.

Another challenge is related to the validity of small scale researches with children. The attention to these studies must not neglect the need of larger scale studies that can obtain generable knowledge about children (Qvortrup, 2000). On the other hand research with children must be a multidisciplinary one, mobilizing different research strategies bringing innovation to that research (Yin, 1994:3).

So a question emerges: must we create everything from the start in order to conduct research with children? No. Mainly it's about changing and adapting existing methods and techniques that can collect children's voices and perspectives on their own worlds. Thus as in any research we must guarantee that the researcher has those abilities and question's him/herself about the best ones related to its research objects and subjects. As Christensen&James (200) argue in any kind of social research the main question is to know what questions to ask and the best way ok asking them or not. Referring to the specificity of research with children:

> "(...) 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, in 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" (Christensen e James, 2000:2)

None of the less there are specific concerns within children's lives research.

As minors children require adult supervision bringing ethical concerns to those researching them. The specificities of children's ages as well as language abilities and degrees of complexity of oral discourses and praxis lead to a careful design of the research path, methods and techniques that reveal themselves as more or less adequate to the child's circumstances and contexts. Also special attention should be given to specific forms of communication and expression that allow children to share their own visions about their worlds and socially constructed lives.

On the other hand the idea of giving children a "voice" does not mean neglecting the contexts of action and research nor the relation that the adult establishes with the child. Finally it doesn't mean ignoring the adult's views about the child. Therefore, to do this, is not to deny the child's conceptual autonomy as argued before: on the contrary, it will help bring up the full picture of their worlds as well as meaningful data about them.

Thus, researchers must take the following premises in account: the child has cognitive and developmental features that we must consider when designing the research. By saying this we do not stand for a universalistic vision of the child, but recognize that a previous knowledge about his/her abilities and acquisitions is important in order to assure an adequate use of research techniques.

Another concern is directed to the nature of the adult/child relationship, as suggested by Mayall (2000), unequal by nature: the adult is seen as authority and strength towards the child and no researcher in any research is able to deny this. As stated by Corsaro (1997) the size is always a central feature of the adult role. Therefore the adult can only be aware and try to reduce this inequality along the research process.

As Mayall argues when referring to the socially constructed nature of the child "inferiority":

"the crucial distinction that makes children children is that they are not adults; as individuals as well as a social group they lack adulthood. This could be seen in several ways as handicap, disadvantage and/or oppression. The components may vary individually and socially. What's common in inter generational relations between children and adults is that children are inferior to adults. This inferiority is shown in several ways: children can't make decisions; they differ from adult knowledge and authority; have little economic power. More widely we can argue that in a given society, generational relations are ruled by generational contracts that impose adult understandings on labour division in that society and the permitted activities of the child. If more was needed the child's inferiority is shown in the week negotiation power they have within the intergenerational contract. (1994:118-119)

Therefore the adoption of the "least adult role" would be an effective solution in order to reduce the unequal nature of social roles between children and adults.

In this sense social research is always about social relations. It matters, then, that researchers and children establish a relation where children feel they participate in the research process, keeping an open and constant dialogue where both children and adults gain control of the situation. As Alderson (2000) suggested children often complaint that their daily experiences are often diminished by adults and not taken seriously in account. In this sense children must be given space in order to express their opinions, tell their daily experiences in different life contexts such as family, kindergarten, school, etc….

Ethical concerns are strongly influenced by democratic traditions and citizens rights. Even so children's protection services are more based in child caring than in participation rights. Researchers working in children's institutions - daycares, kindergartens, after school activities.. – may find it difficult to attend the child's perspectives in their daily routines. Staff frequently discourages researchers in order not to bore children with their questions (Corsaro also addressed this issue regarding the relationship between researchers and working staff in children's institutions, 1997).

Although the UN Convention on Children's Rights clearly states the right of the child to express her opinions freely and to participate in decisions that concern them (eg, articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention, 1989) they aren't always clear as stated before – children's competences and rationality are often denied , namely, the ability of decision making. For researchers a question arises: how to respect children's rationality and get their informed and not coercive consent to participate.

Thus, the question of alterity emerges when we think about it as a power relation between children and adults. On the other hand, children's voices are not uniform if you take individual experiences into account. Therefore adults must be aware of different

manifestations of power relations when researching children's worlds, not only between adult and child but also between children themselves.

The alterity of childhood is always constructed by the relation established between adults and children but also, between children themselves, considering different levels of power and power relation between them. The child, as the other distinct from the adult is, at the same time the other in their peer groups and this is what gives the real dimension of childhood alterity, as a well defined sociological subject in interdependence with adult and child's worlds.