Without a Safety Net: Participatory Techniques in Research with Young Migrants

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Abstract

Researching children, and migrant children in particular, means having to strive to re-address the imbalance of power that comes from the highly vulnerable position of the participants. The need to protect children from physical and psychological harm signifies that adults, in most societies, make the ultimate choice regarding children's participation in activities, while children's dependent position may mean that they do not feel free to refuse an adult's request for collaboration however strongly their freedom to choose is stressed. Researchers need to recognise the imperfections of a relationship that is necessarily unequal, rather than trusting specific techniques to solve these contradictions through their inherent power. Participatory techniques may help children's voices to come through more powerfully by leaving more space for individual styles of interaction and by opening more channels for expression; they cannot be relied on, however, to act as an infallible tool-kit to redress a power imbalance. The strengths and weaknesses of a multiple-technique approach (focus groups, child-led photography and individual interviews) used to collect data in Italy and Ghana are discussed in relation to the aims of the research, the age group of the participants, and the different geographical and social contexts.

Introduction

This paper intends to discuss the issues of power imbalance and the ethical implication of methodological choices that become apparent when doing research with children and young adults. It draws upon doctoral research aiming to explore the 'imaginative geographies' (Said, 1978) of Ghanaian children who have experienced migration to Italy. The research embraces three groups of children: some who migrated to join their families; others who were born in Italy of Ghanaian parents; and a third group who were left in Ghana when one or both parents migrated to Italy. Exploring these children's imaginative geographies means gaining an insight into the mental images that necessarily shape their expectations, ambitions and worries. The confirmation, divergence or frustration of such beliefs upon the

encounter with reality is very likely to be reflected in the way young people[1] negotiate life in countries previously imagined, and in the way they react and adapt to it.

Due to the 'double vulnerability' of the participants, who are children and from a 'minority' background (or, in Ghana, children who are left behind), the issue of power arose acutely during the fieldwork. The methods and procedures chosen were evaluated on the basis of the agency they would afford to the young participants, in the hope that they would, at least partly, readdress power imbalance. However, during the fieldwork it was immediately apparent that techniques and procedures in themselves could not bridge the power gap precisely because of the participants' vulnerability, and that the imbalance needed to be accepted as a necessary element of the adult-child relationship. It was felt that only by accepting the power imbalance as inevitable, could it be addressed productively, in the awareness that no technique would constitute a 'safety net' to provide researcher and participants with equal (or even equivalent) partnership in the research process. Nevertheless, it was felt that a multiple-technique approach could maximize the possibility for all children to find a space within which they could feel comfortable enough to trust the adult researcher with their own stories and experiences.

After illustrating the theoretical background, I shall describe the stages of the research, the techniques adopted to collect the data and the reasons behind the choices made. The various techniques will then be critically reviewed and discussed. The aim is to underline their potential, but also to emphasize the pitfalls that a passive reliance to specific empowering 'recipes' may entail.

Research Background

Migration and 'Imaginative Geographies'

Migration has a powerful impact on children, whether they experience it directly or because it deprives them (even temporarily) of one or both their parents. The impact of migration influences young people's everyday lives and can, in some cases, have negative resonance on the children's physical and emotional wellbeing. Being closely touched by the experience of migration, however, may also improve the children's material conditions and bring awareness of different worlds and ways of life, and is likely to widen the

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[1]In the present article, the terms 'young participant' and 'young person', as well as 'child', will be employed to indicate a human being under the age of 18, in accordance to the definition adopted by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). These terms will consequently be used as synonymous.

children's cultural horizons (D'Emilio, 2007). Yeoh and Lam (2007) note how both mothers and fathers maintain regular contact with the children they left behind through letters, emails, text messages and phone calls, and observe that the connection they entertain with a distant parent is bound to heighten the children's interest in media portrayals of distant worlds. Children who have a close family member abroad are therefore very likely to construct imaginative geographies of the places their parent (or parents) have moved to.

The way in which young people imagine the 'other' (physical space, people, everyday life) by constructing it both on the grounds of difference and sameness, is the object of a study by Holloway and Valentine (2000a) that looks at the way in which children from Britain and New Zealand imagine each other's worlds and lives through the combination of elements from the media, school-based learning and global modes of consumption. However, no research has yet been carried out with the aim of investigating how young people from very different cultural, social and economic backgrounds construct the imaginative geographies of a country that is both very far and, at the same time, very close to them: the one in which a parent, or both parents, are living and to which the children themselves are, in many cases, expecting to move to. Few attempts (e.g. Shakerifar, 2009) have been made to listen to migrant children's own evaluation of the 'before' and 'after' of their experience, and to understand their assessment of their imaginings, once they have been able to look at them retrospectively in the light of 'reality'. Likewise, very little literature is available on the expectations that children born in the country of migration have of the physical and social environment where their parents came from (Armbruster, 2002 is one exception), and on the emotional resonance of imaginings that take place at the point of intersection between two (or more) sets of cultural tools.

Children: from 'Human Becomings' to Competent Human Beings

Traditional childhood studies have, for many decades, held a view of childhood as a universal stage of life characterised largely by its transience, during which human beings are trained to become full members of their social group. This view of children as 'human becomings' (Holloway and Valentine, 2000b), as beings whose identity is yet incomplete, still in the process of developing and, therefore, unreliable, has meant that for a long time social research looked at children's worlds as unworthy of being explored in themselves; children's points of views were valued as an appendage to other more 'serious' investigations into areas such as family or education with young people's voices being too 'childish' (Kesby, 2007) to be listened to in their own right.

The sociology of childhood (James and Prout, 1990; Corsaro, 2005), which has been gaining importance in the past few decades, has challenged this traditional view, and has emphasised instead the socially constructed character of childhood. As a result, the idea of children as adults-in-the-making has slowly been replaced by the concept of childhood as a category that is socially, historically and geographically situated and which, while biologically transient, responds to dynamics and interactions that are peculiar to it. On these grounds, children have come to be seen as competent social actors who can influence the context in which they live, as well as being influenced by it, and who are proficient agents within their everyday worlds. Social research must connect the sociology of childhood with wider issues (James and Prout, 1990) or risk a view of society in which the voice of an essential component goes unheard.

Children and Migration

Reflecting the traditional view of childhood, the role of young people in the migration process has been overlooked for a long time by the literature on migration, with children seen simply as passively adapting to adults' decisions and choices (Faulstich-Orellana et al, 2001). Children's role within migration, however, is far from limited. Very often it is precisely in order to give their offspring a better future that many families decide to leave for a distant, unknown and sometimes unwelcoming country. While they seldom have the power to influence their parents' decision, and are often not consulted about it, many children nevertheless actively try to influence their parents' choice by putting in place resistance strategies and/or oppositional behaviour which directly challenge what is often their parent's main rationale for migration (Dreby, 2007). Once the decision to migrate is taken, however, most young people will actively try to make sense of the reasons behind this choice and of the consequences it entails for them, and they will endeavour to adapt the resulting changes to fit their lives, as well as adapting their lives to the new situation.

A substantial number of family units who decide to migrate do so in stages, with the main migrant actor moving first, settling in the new country, gaining a residence permit and then sending for the other members. As D'Emilio's study for Unicef (2007) illustrates, together with an increase in the quality of life thanks to the remittances sent by their parents, the children that are left behind experience many instances of emotional and psychological distress, and in many cases they have to cope with feelings of desertion, drop in self-esteem, and anger. However, Salazar-Parreñas (2005) argues that being looked after by carers does not necessarily have to be a negative experience for the children and that the emotional consequences they face

depend largely on the quality of care provided and on the efficiency of long-distance parenting, with negative repercussions exacerbated by society's expectations of family and gender roles.

The children who eventually move to join their parents in the receiving country face a series of challenges in adapting to the new environment and reconstructing their social lives. This is particularly so when, as is the case with Ghanaian children in Italy, their physical appearance immediately declares their 'otherness'. The process of integration in the receiving society depends, amongst other factors, on the family environment and on the rate at which parents and children adapt (or don't) to the new society's social norms, language and expectations. The way in which migrants adapt to, react against, or remain separate from the receiving society can also be shaped by the policies of the countries of immigration, as well as on migrant's cultures of origin, and on the strength and cohesion of the ethnic community in the country of arrival (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

As Riccio (2008) observes, the Ghanaian community in Italy can count on strong communal ties, particularly in the North of the country, organized as it is around the various Ghana Nationals Associations and Ghanaian churches. In many cases these institutions provide children with language and geography courses on the country of origin, organize cultural events and performances, give information about Ghana, maintain transnational links with the Ghanaian diaspora all over the world, help new arrivals to settle, and constitute a kind of financial and legal 'insurance' in the case of unexpected crises. Children that are born of parents who originally came from a different country, the second generation 'migrants', as a consequence must have a mental picture of the place(s) that their parents came from, and to which they are probably still tied by a network of relations and friendships. This is a place that, although foreign to the children, still informs much of the family's narratives and everyday practices and therefore feels at the same time very close and very alien to young people.

The fieldwork

Practicalities

In order to explore the imaginative geographies of the different groups of children - Ghanaian children left behind by migrating parents, of children born in Italy of Ghanaian parents and of children who had migrated from one country to the other in order to join their families - the fieldwork was split in two phases. The first phase was carried out in Italy between September and December 2008, and was aimed at collecting data with the latter two groups,

while the second phase was carried out in Ghana between March and May 2009, to collect the experiences and imaginings of children that are left behind.

During the Italian phase of the fieldwork, I interviewed 28 children: 15 were born in Ghana (6 male and 9 female) and had been in Italy for 4 years or less, and 13 (8 female and 5 male) were born in Italy of Ghanaian parents (or had arrived as babies/toddlers). I decided to limit the sample to children attending middle school because the age of this group (11 to 14-15 years of age) meant that the children would be more likely to remember their life 'before and after' migration; moreover, their number would be more concentrated in a few large institutions, each collecting children from several primary schools, thus cutting down the number of gatekeepers and the number of trips necessary to access all the participants.

In Ghana I worked with 14 children, within the same age-bracket, again accessing them through the school (last year of Primary and Junior Secondary School). Due to the Ghanaian head-teachers' widespread concern about the possible negative reactions of some parents to an Italian person interviewing their children (a difficulty which will be discussed more in detail below), all the young participants accessed in the second phase of the fieldwork were found in boarding schools and all of them were female. With only two exceptions, their parent(s) had migrated to Italy when the children were still very young.

Power Imbalance and Participatory Techniques

Work by researchers such as Bushin (2007), Barker and Weller (2003), Christensen and Prout (2002) stresses the desirability of informing children of the purposes of the research and of its possible consequences. They indicate the importance of gaining young people's consent before starting data collection, as a way to empower the children and to respect their agency. On our first meeting I clearly told the young participants what they would be expected to do within the project and the purposes and possible outcomes of the research. I also distributed an information leaflet specifically drafted for the children with the help of my 14-yearold daughter so that content and language would be more appropriate (Barker and Weller, 2003). On the basis of the information given, I then asked for the children's verbal consent as well as for their carers' written consent.

Several researchers (i.e. Langevang, 2007; Darbyshire, 2005; Greene and Hill, 2004), whose work is informed by the sociology of childhood paradigm, employ non-traditional methods such as drawings, role-play or photographs alongside individual and group interviews, as data-gathering

techniques that offer a better insight into children's cultures and experiences. These non-traditional techniques can also help to create a more relaxed and informal atmosphere, which may reduce power imbalances between young participants and adult researchers. I chose to talk to the children in the first instance within focus groups, as I believed that this would be less threatening than meeting an unknown white adult one-to-one and that a group conversation would give me an insight into the children's social and public construction of the migratory discourse (Hennesy and Heary, 2004). At a later stage, I also interviewed the children individually, to allow more personal experiences and points of view to emerge and thus integrate the responses from the focus groups (Mitchell, 2001).

Amongst non-traditional methods, child-led photography is the technique that several authors regard as one that can be fun for young participants (i.e. Clark- Ibáñez, 2007; Barker and Weller, 2003; Punch, 2002; Young and Barrett, 2001) and increase motivation to take part in research as a result. As the children keep the cameras over a period of time, they are under no immediate pressure to respond to the researcher's enquiries as is often the case in an interview setting. This gives the children time to analyse the variety of responses to the researcher's questions that are available to them and to select with some degree of deliberation only those that they wish to disclose (Barker and Weller, 2003). Moreover, the photographs taken can also give researchers an insight into areas of young people's lives that would not otherwise be accessible to them.

After taking part in the focus groups, I gave each child a disposable camera and asked them to take some pictures over the space of a week. The children who had arrived recently in Italy were asked to photograph anything that they had found to be different (or similar) to what they had expected to find in Italy. The children who were born in Italy were asked to photograph anything that they believe to be different (or similar) between Italy and Ghana, while the children left-behind in Ghana by migrating parents were asked to take pictures of all that they think would be different in Italy, as well as of anything/anyone they would be sorry/happy to leave behind.

During the individual interviews, the young participants explained what their photographs depicted and the reasons why they had chosen particular subjects. Focusing on the pictures took some pressure off the children in the one-to-one situation while, at the same time, offering prompts for the conversation. I also felt that looking at the photographs within an individual interview setting would be more respectful of the children's privacy than asking them to share their pictures with peers.

While photography is only one of the many task-based techniques

available, I felt it would be better suited than others to the age of the participants. Drawing, in fact, could have been perceived as too 'babyish' by some of the children, as well as being a technique that depends too heavily on the individual child's perception of his/her artistic abilities, while diaries, life-lines and other procedures that rely on writing seemed too akin to school work, especially since some of the children are still struggling with spoken and written Italian.

Accessing the Participants: a Journey through Gatekeepers,

Forgetfulness and a Puzzling 'Coincidence'

Phase one: Italy

The start of the Italian phase of the fieldwork was held back by difficulties in obtaining an appointment with very busy head-teachers in order to discuss the project, and further delay was later caused by the children forgetting to bring back the signed consent forms. Very few children remembered to do so by the first deadline and, although it was clear in most cases that the failure to bring back the signed consent forms did not mean lack of willingness to take part in the research, I had to undertake several trips to each school in order to collect all the necessary documents. In a number of instances, the class teachers seemed almost reassured by my struggle to gather the required material, as it was pointed out that I had come across a common problem, that of the recurrent break-down in communication between Ghanaian families and educational institutions.

Phase two: Ghana

The first requirement I had to meet, in order to access Ghanaian schools, was to obtain a letter of introduction signed by the Head of Department of Basic Education[2]. I then asked a contact within the Ministry of Education Science and Sports to suggest a series of schools in the Accra area where children from migrant families may be studying. Since I believe I had been clear about the background of the participants I was looking for, I couldn't help wondering whether the very expensive private schools I had been suggested in the first instance were a consequence of the common over-estimation of migrants' economic success or, alternatively, whether I had been steered towards these institutions in order to show me Ghana's education at its best. I subsequently gradually managed to circumscribe my search to schools that were more likely to be attended by the participants I required (e.g. the best state-funded institutions) but was confronted with the head teachers' reluctance to let me

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[2]In Ghana, Compulsory Universal Basic Education consists of 11 years: 2 years of Kindergarten; 6 years of Primary School; 3 years of Junior High (Secondary) School

access the children. This was due, as some of them quite openly pointed out, to my Italian nationality and my desire to talk about migration, two facts that, combined, could have alarmed a few parents/carers in the eventuality that some of them are in Italy 'illegally', a very real possibility. This led to a series of refusals that left me quite concerned, over two weeks into my two-month stay, about the chances of success of my data collection.

I finally got in touch with the head teachers of two residential (boarding) schools who said that they did have pupils in that fitted my criteria and that they would be happy for me to access them. I was not required to gain parents'/carers' consent since, the head teachers pointed out, being in a boarding school means that the majority of the children only go home during the holiday periods; consequently, the decision regarding whether young people are to take part in extra-curricular activities with outside professionals is left to the judgement and discretion of the head-teacher, to whom the children are entrusted.

Both the boarding schools are mixed in their intake, and therefore it had never occurred to me to check the gender of the participants before meeting them, in the assumption that boys and girls would both be naturally represented in the sample in some proportion. I was consequently quite surprised in discovering, upon meeting the children, that they were all girls. I was assured by the head-teachers that this was a chance occurrence, and that they had not made any selection that could have skewed the sample's gender balance. As a consequence, the data I managed to collect during the Ghanaian phase of the fieldwork is very specific to girls attending urban residential schools.

The techniques: A critical view

Focus Groups

I met the children in eleven focus groups in total, seven in Italy and four in Ghana. Of these, however, only a minority produced the type of participant interaction that is desirable in a focus group, while the majority tended to be more akin to parallel interviews, with each child taking turns to answer the facilitator's questions. Interaction amongst participants was not very easy to achieve and, when it was achieved, only seemed to last for a short time, with the facilitator almost invariably at the centre of the conversation. This is, as many authors have pointed out, a common issue in focus groups with children, part and parcel of the modality of communication between children and adults, and especially so when this takes place in a school setting where the "IRF" (Initiation, by the teacher, child's Response, teacher's Feedback)

mode of communication is strongly prevalent (Mercer, 1995). Furthermore, speaking in a group means speaking for an audience (Kitzinger and Barour, 2001) and this can influence quite substantially the style of interaction and the responses that are achieved during a focus group session.

However, most of the children seemed to enjoy the focus groups and, when asked to provide feedback on the techniques (Hill, 2006), the vast majority said that they had preferred chatting in a group because it was more fun and 'you can be with your friends'. I made an effort to try to create a more relaxed atmosphere by starting the conversation with a little lesson in Twi (Ghana's lingua franca) in order to reverse the teacher-learner roles; I also allowed the children to choose freely their own seats and provided some (much appreciated) chocolates to share during the interview. As described by other researchers using focus group interviews (Gibson, 2007; Hennessy and Heary, 2004; Kitzinger and Barbour, 2001), I needed to make a conscious effort to get every child to interact, as stronger personalities tended to dominate the group and to take over most of the conversation-time available. However, I also felt quite strongly that it was important to respect each child's individual style of interaction within a group situation and therefore I tried not to press unduly for participation, nor to repress enthusiastic contribution; I was also feeling safe in the knowledge that at a later stage, during the individual interviews, space would be provided to offer each child an opportunity to contribute his/her own input, a further advantage of combining focus groups and individual interviews.

In most of the schools the head-teachers engaged the classroom-assistants' help to collect the children from the different classes and to take them to the room where I was waiting for them. The need to fully inform and brief all involved in the research, in this case including the classroom assistants, was evident when it emerged that in one Italian school the classroom assistant had confused the word 'sociologist' with 'psychologist'. This unsettled the children who thought they were being shepherded to a professional figure conventionally linked with trouble and stigma. Fortunately, on learning of the misunderstanding, I was able to reassure the children about my interest in hearing their voices and to reiterate the schedule and aims of the research (which I had already outlined during the introductory meeting).

Child-led Photography

While several authors emphasise the use of child-led photography as a technique that increases motivation by being more fun, unusual and engaging, the fact that some children may actually resist taking pictures, or even dislike the activity and attempt to avoid participation, seems to be less thoroughly discussed (for a discussion of some drawbacks see Langevang,

2007; Kesby, 2007).

I had given the children one week in which to bring the pictures, which is the average length of time indicated by other researchers (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Langevang, 2007) who used child-led photography. However, it took almost a fortnight and several reminders for the children in Italy to bring the cameras back. Moreover, the photographs taken by a few of the children proved to be a series of hurried stills taken over a space of minutes in the school's grounds, something which I believe signifies a lack of interest in the proposed activity and the wish to conclude it as quickly as possible. This was quite a contrast with the reaction of the children in Ghana, who took most of the photographs available, even though many were very similar views of the same locations since they were all living in the same boarding school environment. While the vast majority of the children, both in Italy and in Ghana, said they had enjoyed taking the photographs, a few of the Italian children equalled it to homework, something that they had forgotten to do as they had other activities that took up their spare time or, in one case, that they had disliked having to do. This confirms Christensen's belief (cited in Hill, 2006) that young people perceive their free time as a precious commodity that they strive to maintain control over and which they resent being 'hijacked' by adults.

While using child-led photography as one of the data-collection techniques did 'what it said on the tin' (namely, motivated the children by being 'fun', gave them agency and allowed the researcher a glimpse into otherwise inaccessible spaces outside the school), I believe that the amount of other people's input in the choice of subjects for the pictures was much greater than the available literature implies. I had given the children advice on photography etiquette and safety, as well as a printed set of instructions and tips where I stressed also that the camera was theirs only to use. Once the cameras were collected and the pictures developed, however, I realised that the data provided for a more complex point of view that I had bargained for. I became aware, when talking to the children about their pictures, that I was listening to other voices as well as that of the individual child's, and that I could only regard each picture as a 'choral' performance. In a few cases, the other voices that came through, while discussing the pictures with the children, were those of family and friends whom the children had asked for advice or to whom they had lent the camera. In some other cases, while there was no mention of other people's involvement, I strongly felt that the children had tried to look at their world through the eyes of a white Italian adult female and to put my own voice, or their rendition of it, into their narratives (Westcott and Littleton, 2004), as when the pictures portrayed places chosen for their aesthetic or 'educational' value, or were staged images of Ghanaian folklore.

Not all the children mentioned other people's interference, but it is plausible that a degree of outside input was more widespread than directly reported, as a camera is a rather conspicuous instrument that will very likely attract (welcome or unwelcome) attention, especially when held by a child in close proximity to others (Langevang, 2007).

As data, photographs that are 'made to order' need, therefore, to be regarded as co-constructed representations of reality that may involve several points of view: those of the participants and possibly of other people that they come in contact with, but also the point of view of the researcher as anticipated by the participants themselves. The variety of voices that can be conveyed through this technique, however, is proof of the great freedom that photography allows children, precisely for its being outside of the researcher's control. It gives them the opportunity to weave into their narratives, if they so wish, those of others to whom they are close. Photography also gives children a chance to shape their narratives so that they convey as much, or as little, about their personal experiences as they feel comfortable to disclose and it allows the participant more scope for 'resistance', in exercising their agency by defying the researcher's requests of compliance (Kothari, 2001), something much harder to do in an interview environment. The film handed in by one of the children to whom I had been introduced as the 'psychologist', once developed, only offered a single picture, that of a blue sky with a scattering of white clouds, a picture that I choose to interpret as the child's attempt at distancing herself as much as she could from the research; I decided, as a consequence, not to interview the child a second time.

An issue that seemed to arise in Italy, but not in Ghana, was also the 'coolness' of the instrument. Some of the Ghanaian children born or living in Italy have cameras in their mobile phones, or have their own digital cameras. The disposable cameras I used were therefore not objects that all were keen to be seen around with, as they were rather large and low-tech; some of the children made this clear by the reception they gave to these somewhat unfashionable instruments. This did not happen in Ghana, though, where all the children seemed very keen to use the cameras and did not show any problems with their lack of 'style'. There is, however, a slightly more uncomfortable explanation to the difference between the children's responses to the disposable cameras in Ghana and in Italy than the degree of technological sophistication of young people in the two countries. The Ghanaian children in Italy are striving every day to blend-in as much as possible in a largely white environment in which their blackness is a constant reminder of their 'otherness'. Holding a rather conspicuous plastic camera would mean for them to risk attracting even further unwanted and unwelcome

attention, a risk that they were not all prepared to run to please a white Italian lady. To the girls in Ghana, living in an environment designed to enhance conformity, such as that of a boarding school, and where potentially 'distracting' objects such as mobile phones or cameras are not allowed, the possibility of standing out and being party to a rare 'exception to the rule' by taking pictures was, instead, a very attractive proposition, even with a rather primitive instrument such as the camera they were offered.

Individual Interviews

After I had developed the films, I interviewed each child individually in order to gain an insight into what the subject of the pictures was meant to be (while sometimes obvious, this was by no means always so), and also into the reason why the photographs were taken. Before we started looking at the photographs, I asked each child to look through the prints and remove any picture that they were not happy to discuss with me (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007). I then numbered each child's pictures sequentially and made sure I called out the photographs' number when referring to them during the interview, so that each picture could be identified and cross-referenced with the interview data for analysis.

While most of the children said that they had preferred meeting the researcher and talking in a group situation, a few of the children declared that they had felt more comfortable on their own, thus reinforcing the complementarities of the two techniques in their adapting to different relating styles and giving access to narratives of different natures (Mitchell, 2001). At the end of the individual interviews, the children were thanked for their help and 'paid' for their contribution in handfuls of chocolate coins.

Research with Young People: Ethical Tightropes and Balancing Acts

Social research that involves young participants is a field of investigation fraught with ethical pitfalls that can make researchers feel they are in a no-win situation: their wish for participants' free and unrestricted collaboration and for addressing power imbalances too often clashes with the need to keep children safe from harm by shielding them behind adults' authority. It is a very difficult balancing act, not always possible to achieve, but one that has to be attempted and accepted in its imperfection in order to allow for some of the most marginal of the members of society to have a voice.

Children's Protection and Children's Agency: an Impossible Match?

The view of childhood that characterises most Western countries quite

understandably stresses the need to protect children and shield them from possible harm by subjecting their involvement in research to parental consent. However, this also poses a series of questions about the very basis of children's participation, and raises some important ethical issues: how can we be sure that the children's choice to take part in research reflects their wish and not their parents/carers/guardians'? Would most children feel that they are able to refuse to cooperate with the request of an adult simply by being reassured they are free to do so? To what extent are children captive participants, and can this ever be otherwise?

I believe that choosing whether or not to take part in research is not a real option for children, especially so for those of immigrant families, who have to contend with the double imbalance in power relations that derives from being children as well being part of a minority group. Even when, as in the case of the present project, young people are very clearly reassured that they are under no obligation to take part in the study and that they can drop out at any time without needing to justify their withdrawal, as researchers we need to take into consideration that children may simply go along with our request because compliance to adults' demands is what is generally expected of them. Moreover, the last word in a child's participation invariably comes from the parents/carers/guardians' consent (or lack thereof), and this necessarily means the possible inclusion of unwilling participants as well as the exclusion of keen ones.

Clearly, there is no easy answer to the questions raised by the difficulties in reconciling children's protection and children's freedom of choice. Researchers need to be aware of these issues and to build them into their investigation's planning and findings rather than relying on a few 'tricks of the trade' that claim to bridge what is, almost invariably, an unbridgeable gap.

Reminding and Pressurising: a Fine Line

As related earlier, I encountered considerable difficulty in getting the Italianbased participants to bring back consent forms and cameras on time and therefore I needed to go back to the schools several times before all the material was gathered. This, however, sat rather uneasily with the need to make sure that the children were not forced in any way into the research; the boundaries between reminding the children to bring back what they had forgotten and putting pressure on them to take part were, in fact, very fuzzy and at times it was very hard to tell if these boundaries had been crossed. Were the children forgetting or were they trying to opt out of taking part? I kept asking myself this question and finding that the only answer was to be found in my personal judgement.

In Ghana, as explained earlier, the consent for the children to take part in the study was given by the head-teachers on the parents' behalf, because of the residential nature of the schools. The children were clearly told during the first meeting that they were under no obligation to take part and that they could refuse to answer any questions or leave at any time. However, it is not clear whether any of them would really have felt 'brave' enough to refuse to take part, or to leave in the middle of a conversation. Did they really have any choice but to stay and take part? Did they feel they had total freedom to decide, no matter how eagerly and convincingly they were told that it was their decision? My positionality as an adult, white, Italian female and my introduction to them through their head-teacher were all elements that could influence their decision to stay involved. However happy they appeared to be to take part, the imbalance of power was tangible and largely unresolved (Gallagher, 2008).

Discussion

Children's vulnerability, and society's responsibility to guarantee their safety and happiness, means that research into children's experiences and social worlds has to be filtered and vetoed by adults. While this is fundamentally important in order to protect children from harm, it also means that young people cannot be totally free to decide whether or not they want to take part in research projects and that they may have to bow to adults' decisions over what is deemed 'good', 'best' or 'important' for them. Even when, as researchers, we attempt to redress power imbalance by trying to aid children's agency as much as possible in all the research stages, by using participatory techniques, by informing young people accurately and asking for their consent to take part, by asking and providing feedback, etc. the relationship between adults and children remains highly unequal (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Gallagher, 2008; Langevang, 2007; Holt, 2004). Even if, as some researchers have attempted, children are involved in the planning and organising of research, I would argue that there is an unavoidable dilemma peculiar to working with children, which stems from society's need (and duty) to safeguard their well being and from the unavoidable corollary that sees adults as ultimately in charge of any decision-making. However, as much as we strive for children's freedom to chose, as researchers we can never guarantee that young participants will be able to resist taking part in a study as they can be made to comply, however subtly, by well meaning parents or educators. Nor can we be sure that children who would like to take part are not prevented from doing so by similarly well-meaning adults. Building on Kothari's critique of participatory approaches (2001), I would argue that research with children should acknowledge this uncertainty rather

than avoiding it or pretending that choosing a particular technique or a specific procedure will suffice to dissipate it. Children's agency expresses itself in many, sometimes subtle, ways, which range from changing the researcher's agenda by hijacking the conversation and the research space, to passive resistance and the boycotting of the researcher's requests, to taking part enthusiastically in the activities suggested.

The same privileged, powerful position that adults enjoy in western contemporary society means that they can exert, simply by their adultness, pressures that they may not always be fully aware of, despite their best intentions. The line between asking children for help and pressurising them into complying is very difficult to draw, as I hope my experience with the children's failure to return consent forms or cameras has shown. Knowing where this line is and stopping before it is crossed is, of course, part of a researcher's skills as well as of personal judgement, but the fact that this line may still be overstepped despite the best of intentions and careful consideration, should be kept to the fore of any project that involves young participants.

Conclusion

While there is an irresolvable imbalance of power between adults and children that needs to be given full consideration, a careful choice of methods and techniques is fundamental in order to ensure that young participants are given at least an opportunity to find a space in which they can feel comfortable (Kesby, 2005). Whereas focus groups and individual interviews will complement one another and ensure that all children get a chance to be heard in a context that better suits their individual styles of relating, child-led photography can allow young participants to choose their response away from the researcher's presence and unavoidable pressure. However, a child holding a camera will not easily pass unnoticed, even more so, of course, when he/she is from a minority background. The possibility that the pictures we are looking at may not be the child's sole and unrestricted choice or that they may have been taken by other people, needs to be considered when analysing the data (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). Asking participants to talk about their pictures, but also giving them the opportunity beforehand to take away any pictures that they don't feel like discussing (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007), can help researchers gain a clearer understanding of the children's own points of view. Again, however, researchers need to be aware that no matter how much children may enjoy taking the photographs, some of them may do so only because they do not feel able to refuse an adult's request and that their choice of subjects may reflect this.

Acknowledgements

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